On The Universal Plan

Sam Nemri

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It is both encouraging and humbling that reviewers—human and artificial alike—have found the central argument broadly compelling. Nevertheless, the final assessment rests, as it should, with you, the reader.

Preface – Why?

"For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize; they wondered originally at the obvious difficulties, then advanced little by little and stated difficulties about the greater matters, e.g. about the phenomena of the moon and those of the sun and of the stars, and about the origin of the universe."
—Aristotle, *Metaphysics (Book I, Part II)*

Pause with me for a moment, and imagine yourself rising slowly above the Earth. From orbit, the planet gleams with oceans of blue, continents of green and brown, and shifting swirls of white cloud. It looks peaceful, fragile, a shimmering jewel set in the blackness of space. But within that fragile shell of atmosphere lies a world overflowing with life and story.

In Paris, lights spill across the avenues as the Eiffel Tower glitters over cafés where friends gather in laughter, glasses clinking late into the night. In Shanghai, neon blazes against the sky as trains rush and millions cross bridges, a river of humanity in constant motion. On Mount Kilimanjaro, clouds drift over slopes where climbers trace paths through lush forest, alpine meadows, and barren volcanic rock toward the snow-capped summit. In Jerusalem, the ancient stones glow bright in the evening sun, the murmur of prayers in Hebrew and Arabic audible everywhere.

And within these vast human tapestries are moments of deep intimacy: a young mother rocking her baby gently, singing a lullaby as the child's breathing slows and sleep overtakes them; a group of teenagers—three boys and two girls—sitting together in the night, speaking their fears and hopes aloud for the first time, their voices soft with vulnerability; a solitary, determined student bent over books, tracing lines with weary fingers in a late-night library; a scholar turning the delicate pages of a manuscript, connecting with the words of long-forgotten minds; a

scientist in a quiet lab, recalibrating instruments, repeating an experiment for the hundredth time, inching forward toward discovery.

Beyond the human world lies the Earth's natural splendor. The Alps rise in jagged glory, sunlight painting their peaks pink and gold at dawn. The Himalayas stand even higher, mountains so vast they seem less like a mountain range and more like an entire world of its own. Oceans breathe across the globe, waves rising and breaking in endless rhythm, their silver surfaces glinting in moonlight. Forests awaken each morning with the songs of birds, squirrels leaping branch to branch, deer stepping softly through the undergrowth. At night those same woods turn to mystery: silence spreads, the air grows cool, an owl hoots across the darkness, and above the canopy a thousand stars burn in the ink-black sky. And farther south, Antarctica lies stark and immense, its winds howling across endless plains of ice, while on isolated outposts like Bouvet Island, no voices are heard at all—only seabirds and the crash of surf.

Lift your gaze upward. The Moon hangs pale and watchful, its scarred surface reflecting softly on Earth's oceans, pulling tides in and out with unceasing rhythm. Beyond it blazes the Sun—a furnace of hydrogen and helium, its surface churning with storms of unimaginable scale. From its core, light takes thousands of years to reach the surface, only then to stream outward across space, giving warmth to Earth, driving the winds, feeding the forests, sustaining every living thing.

Drift outward into the Solar System. Earth becomes one of many worlds orbiting the Sun. Mars moves red and desolate, its canyons dwarfing the Grand Canyon, its volcanoes taller than Mount Everest, its silence absolute. Jupiter looms immense, cloaked in storms, its Great Red Spot a tempest that has raged for centuries. Around it, moons whirl: Io wracked with eruptions, Europa hiding a secret ocean beneath ice, Ganymede etched with ridges and grooves. Saturn spins farther out, its magnificent rings glimmering like a frozen crown. Uranus tilts oddly on its side, rolling along its orbit, while Neptune's cobalt atmosphere seethes with winds faster than sound. At the outer edge, Pluto drifts in exile, a lonely wanderer circling at the threshold of interstellar space.

Now the Solar System fades, vanishing into the vastness of the Milky Way. Our galaxy stretches across 100,000 light-years, a grand spiral of hundreds of billions of stars. Nebulae glow like cosmic lanterns—the Eagle Nebula birthing new suns, the Crab Nebula spreading the remnants of a dead one. Pulsars beam like lighthouses, their signals sweeping the void. Star clusters sparkle like gems against the darkness. And at the galaxy's heart, hidden in shadow, a supermassive black hole—Sagittarius A*—holds everything in its grasp, bending even light itself.

Expand farther and our galaxy becomes but one in the Local Group. The Andromeda Galaxy glimmers nearby, vast and luminous, destined to collide and merge with the Milky Way in a slow dance of stars. The Magellanic Clouds, irregular galaxies glowing faintly, orbit like companions. Together, dozens of galaxies form our small neighborhood of the cosmos.

Beyond lie galaxy clusters, each holding thousands of galaxies bound in titanic webs of gravity. Superclusters stretch across space, woven together into filaments of unimaginable scale. Between them, voids gape—enormous expanses nearly empty of galaxies, true deserts of the cosmos. Here, some of the universe's most powerful beacons shine: quasars, the blazing hearts of young galaxies, where matter spirals into supermassive black holes, releasing more energy than entire galaxies of stars. Their light, ancient and fierce, crosses billions of years to reach us.

Step back farther still, and the universe itself reveals its grand design. Trillions of galaxies stretch in all directions, each teeming with suns and worlds, their combined light forming the cosmic tapestry. Finally, imagine the universe as a single object. Perhaps it is spherical, its surface curving back upon itself; perhaps it is flat, stretching into infinity. In every direction, galaxies flee from one another as space itself expands. And what's visible beyond this cosmos? Nothing. Not darkness, not emptiness, but true nothingness—no matter, no energy, not even space or time. Against this unthinkable backdrop, the universe itself appears like an island of being in a sea of absolute absence.

And here you hover, having traveled from the lullaby of a mother soothing her child to the cataclysm of galaxies colliding. From the laughter of friends to the roar of quasars. From the silence of forests to the silence of intergalactic voids. All of it—every life, every star, every galaxy—is bound together in this one universe, a single, beautiful, and magnificent whole. But *why? Why is it there at all? What does it all mean?*

The desire to know is almost unbearable. Whole galaxies spin and collide while we live out our brief human decades. To be human is to stand on the edge of an abyss so vast it seems designed to humble us. And yet, here we are. Small, fragile, and fleeting, but conscious. We alone among the creatures of Earth can look at the night sky and ask not only, *What is it?* but *Why is it?* That question, once felt, refuses to let go. If there exist rational beings in other worlds, then they have doubtless asked the same question. It is inescapable.

But here lies the great irony. Despite the enormity of our situation, despite the grandeur of the universe and the pressing weight of mortality, most of us live as though the deepest questions were optional curiosities. We devote our days to paychecks, promotions, and the approval of peers. We spend years chasing degrees, often caring more for the diploma than for the knowledge it represents. We bend ourselves into exhausting shapes to impress people who will one day forget our names.

And then, when confronted with questions about existence—questions that reach to the root of everything—we wave them off as “abstract,” “unpractical,” or “philosophical” in the pejorative sense. We treat the ultimate as irrelevant, and the trivial as ultimate. That inversion of priorities should alarm us. What could be more “serious” than discovering whether reality itself has meaning? Centuries ago, Blaise Pascal captured this tension with frightening clarity. He stripped away our distractions and forced us to confront our situation without illusion. His words deserve to be read in full:

"I know not who sent me into the world, nor what the world is, nor what I myself am. I am terribly ignorant of everything. I know not what my body is, nor my senses, nor my soul and that part of me which thinks what I say, which reflects upon itself as well as upon all external things, and has no more knowledge of itself than of them. I see the terrifying immensity of the universe which surrounds me, and find myself limited to one corner of this vast expanse, without knowing why I am set down here rather than elsewhere, nor why the brief period appointed for my life is assigned to me at this moment rather than another in all the eternity that has gone before and will come after me. On all sides I behold nothing but infinity, in which I am a mere atom, a mere passing shadow that returns no more. All I know is that I must soon die, but what I understand least of all is this very death which I cannot escape. As I know not whence I come, so I know not whither I go. I only know that on leaving this world I fall for ever into nothingness or into the hands of a wrathful God, without knowing to which of these two states I shall be everlastingly consigned. Such is my condition, full of weakness and uncertainty. From all this I conclude that I ought to spend every day of my life without seeking to know my fate. I might perhaps be able to find a solution to my doubts; but I cannot be bothered to do so, I will not take one step towards its discovery."[1]

Pascal can only regard such indifference as insane. Our condition ought to compel us to genuinely and seriously seek the ultimate truths of reality. Pascal refuses to let us hide. He names our ignorance, our fragility, our mortality. But above all, he names our indifference—the fact that we can live in such conditions and *not care enough to seek an answer*.

And yet, Pascal himself was proof of something extraordinary: the human mind. For all our smallness, we possess a gift beyond measure. We can imagine the infinite. We can reason about necessity and

[1] Les pensées, pg. 11

possibility. We can calculate the motions of planets and map intergalactic clusters millions of light-years away and unlock the codes of DNA within the cell. We can contemplate beauty, discover justice, and hunger for truth. Think of it: a creature as fragile as a leaf (relatively) has within it a faculty capable of grasping *eternal truths*. This is astonishing. It is as if reality itself were whispering to us that meaning is not only possible, but intended—that our thirst for truth is not an accident, but *a clue*.

The idea of a **Universal Plan** is far older than modern spirituality, speculative cosmology, or contemporary metaphysics. Across centuries, philosophers, psychologists, educators, theologians, and natural scientists have repeatedly returned to the intuition that reality is not merely chaotic motion, but possesses some deeper intelligibility, direction, or hidden order. In the ancient world, Greek philosophers such as Aristotle argued that nature acts toward ends or purposes—a principle later called *teleology*. Medieval thinkers extended this into theological visions of providence, while Enlightenment philosophers sought to reinterpret cosmic order in rational and historical terms rather than purely religious ones. What is striking is not merely that the idea persists, but that it reappears independently in radically different intellectual traditions: political philosophy, developmental psychology, education, ethics, and science all seem to circle back to the possibility that humanity and the universe participate in some larger unfolding structure.

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant, writing during the Enlightenment, proposed that human history itself might be intelligible only when viewed through the lens of a deeper "plan" embedded within nature. In *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View* (1784), Kant suggests that the apparent chaos of wars, ambitions, and social conflict may conceal "a universal plan in Nature" directing humanity gradually toward civil order and cosmopolitan unity. Rather than presenting history as meaningless randomness, Kant imagines that even human antagonism may unknowingly serve a larger developmental process. The idea is especially intriguing because Kant was not writing as a mystic, but as one of the foundational philosophers of modern rationalism; yet even he found himself drawn toward the

possibility that beneath historical disorder there exists an unseen architecture guiding the human species toward greater unity and moral maturity.[2]

More than a century later, the Italian physician and educator Maria Montessori expressed a remarkably cosmic vision of reality through her concept of "cosmic education." Montessori believed that every element of existence—from stars and oceans to insects and human civilizations—participates in an interconnected "universal plan." In her educational philosophy, children are not merely trained to absorb information; they are gradually awakened to the realization that they themselves belong to a vast relational order extending throughout nature and history. Montessori repeatedly described the universe as governed by patterns, harmony, and purposeful interdependence. Her language is striking because it blends scientific observation with almost metaphysical wonder: every being, however small, contributes something necessary to the unfolding equilibrium of the whole. In this sense, the "Universal Plan" becomes not only a philosophical abstraction, but an ethical vision of participation within a living cosmos.[3]

The Italian psychiatrist and founder of psychosynthesis Roberto Assagioli approached the idea from yet another direction—that of inner consciousness and the evolution of the self. In *The Act of Will*, Assagioli writes that one of the highest achievements of human development is "integrating the individual plan in the Universal Plan." For Assagioli, the human personality is not isolated or self-contained, but part of a greater spiritual and psychological reality. He argues that personal meaning emerges most fully when individual purpose aligns with something larger than egoic desire. What makes his formulation especially compelling is that he frames the Universal Plan not as rigid determinism, but as an expanding horizon of participation: the more consciousness matures, the more it perceives itself as connected to

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[2] Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View," ninth thesis, *German History in Documents and Images*.
[3] Maria Montessori, *What You Should Know About Your Child*, quoted in Camilo Grazzini, "Maria Montessori's Cosmic Vision, Cosmic Plan, and Cosmic Education," *AMI Journal*, 157–58.

wider dimensions of life, humanity, and existence itself. In Assagioli's thought, the Universal Plan becomes simultaneously cosmic and intimate—a structure woven into both the universe and the depths of the human psyche.[4]

Scientists have often expressed a similar sense that the universe possesses a deeper intelligibility and unity beyond mere mechanical chaos. The theoretical physicist Albert Einstein, for example, described the essence of "cosmic religious feeling" as the desire "to experience the universe as a single significant whole."[5] For Einstein, scientific inquiry did not diminish wonder; it intensified the perception that reality forms an interconnected and meaningful order.

The English physicist and cosmologist Paul Davies advances this intuition even further. Reflecting on the remarkable structure of the cosmos, he writes: "The laws of nature are rigged not only in favor of complexity, or just in favor of life, but also in favor of *mind.* To put it dramatically, it implies that *mind* is written into the laws of nature in a fundamental way." Davies repeatedly returns to the astonishing relationship between consciousness and the universe itself, arguing that humanity's emergence appears too deeply woven into cosmic reality to be dismissed as mere accident. As he elsewhere admits: "I cannot believe that our existence in this universe is a mere quirk of fate, an accident of history, an incidental blip in the great cosmic drama. Our involvement is too intimate." He continues: "That the universe has organized its own self-awareness—is for me powerful evidence that there is 'something going on' behind it all. The impression of design is overwhelming." Yet Davies does not abandon science for mysticism; rather, he suggests that scientific explanation and meaning may coexist: "Science may explain all the processes whereby the universe evolves, but that still leaves room for there to be a meaning behind existence."[6]

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[4] Roberto Assagioli, *The Act of Will*, 187–88.
[5] Albert Einstein, "Religion and Natural Science," in *Scientific Autobiography and Other Papers* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1959), 183–84.
[6] Paul Davies, *The Fifth Miracle: The Search for the Origin and Meaning of Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 271; *The Mind of God: The Scientific Basis for a Rational World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 232; *The Cosmic Blueprint: New Discoveries in Nature's Creative Ability to Order the Universe* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 203, emphasis added.

These thinkers reveal that the language of a "Universal Plan" is not an isolated curiosity or fringe invention, but part of a long intellectual tradition spanning philosophy, psychology, education, science, and reflections on history itself. Though each thinker means something slightly different by the term, all share a profound intuition: that reality may possess a hidden coherence exceeding immediate appearances. Whether conceived as the rational unfolding of history, the interconnected harmony of life, the spiritual integration of the self into a larger whole, or the intelligibility of the universe, the Universal Plan emerges again and again as humanity's attempt to articulate the possibility that existence is not merely accidental, but meaningful on a cosmic scale.

This brings us to the urgency of the matter. If there is indeed a Plan—a *telos*, a design, a *Mind*—then it changes everything. Your life is not an accident. Your suffering is not meaningless. Your choices are not wasted. To ignore this possibility is not practical; it is reckless. And if there is no Plan, then this too must be faced. For then every ounce of dignity we can summon shall collapse in the face of the void. Either way, the question cannot be brushed aside. To refuse to answer is still to answer, and to answer by neglect is the gravest mistake of all.

You may say, "I don't need your inquiry or some flimsy notion of 'transcendence' to be happy. I'm perfectly content exactly as I am, exactly where I am. I make meaning for myself." But your meaning is not objective. It is a subjective bias you impose on yourself. Such an illusion will not bring us closer to the ultimate truth about reality. So go ahead, if you wish. Create meaning for yourself and never stop to ask about what lies ahead, or what may explain the very universe itself. But why? Why fabricate such notions when the grand investigation is within your reach? Why settle for a fleeting mirage when you can strike gold? You are capable of far more than you can imagine, even if you do not believe it now. This may sound impossibly heavy. But sometimes the deepest truths come through in the simplest places—even in stories we grew up with. As the beloved fictional character Son Goku once said, "You already have all the power you need! Just *bring it out*!" Please, if you can hear me, do not let the opportunity pass you by. *Now* is the time.

And so, dear reader, this is not merely a philosophical exercise. It is about you. Your life. Your hopes. Your griefs. Your longings. You are not a spectator in this drama; you are a character within it. The question of whether the universe has ultimate meaning is not an external puzzle—it is the question of whether *you* have meaning. If there is a Universal Plan, then you are part of it. If there is purpose, then it enfolds your story, however ordinary or broken. And if there is a Mind behind reality, then you are already known by it. This book does not demand belief; it invites honesty. It asks you not to dismiss the greatest question of all because you are too busy, too distracted, or too afraid. It challenges you to step forward with courage and openness, to let your mind stretch as wide as the stars, and to let your heart be unsettled until it finds rest.

For if the universe is truly a story, then you—yes, you—are one of its protagonists. And nothing is more serious than discovering what kind of story it is, and what role you are meant to play.

Part I – Philosophy

I. Introduction

"Why are there beings rather than nothing? That is the question. Clearly it is no ordinary question. Why are there beings, why is there anything at all, rather than nothing?—obviously *this* is the first of all questions."
—Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*

Have you ever thought that, maybe, *just maybe*, the most important thing or truth in the world could be right in front of us? Or is reality too odd, too mysterious, to be understood in such a way? Ever since the dawn of time, people have been asking these kinds of questions. Why *is* the world *this way?* It certainly seems that it could have been different (just think about cartoons)! Analytic philosophers Alexander Pruss and Joshua Rasmussen contemplate: "Virtually everything we encounter in ordinary experience can, apparently, fail to exist. Cars, iPads, telephone poles, towers, flowers, mittens, kittens, bricks, sticks, planets, stars, dust: none of these things *have* to exist, it seems. We can easily imagine a universe without such things; and there was a time before anything of this sort existed. It seems the things with which we are familiar are *contingent*—i.e., possibly absent.[7] Is everything contingent? Or, might there also be one or more things that exist of *necessity*? A necessary thing, as we are thinking of it, would be something that exists no matter what possible situation obtains. Its non-existence at any time would be impossible in the strongest sense. So, for example, a necessary thing cannot be assembled or disassembled. It cannot snap into being or snap

[7] There is Williamson's proposal (Williamson 2001) that everything exists of necessity. But even Williamson allows for contingency in the world. He says it is contingent, for instance, whether a given physical thing is physical (pp. 12–13). And in general, where one might ordinarily say that objects pass in and out of existence, Williamson will say they pass in and out of a certain basic category of being (a category he calls 'concrete,' which is to be distinguished from the category of causally-capable things, which we call 'concrete'). Someone in Williamson's shoes could wonder, therefore, whether anything is necessarily on the side of this basic category which they are currently on.

out of being. It cannot *not* exist—no matter what. Is there anything like that?"[8]

The question of necessary existence sits at a strange fault line in thought—where cosmology, ontology, and theology all press against the same mystery from different directions: why anything exists at all, and whether it ever *had* to.

Modern cosmology often sounds like a metaphysical ambition disguised as physics. Stephen Hawking describes the goal as "a complete understanding of the universe, why it is as it is and why it exists at all" (Boslough, 1989, p. 77). Sean Carroll speaks in a similar register of seeking "a complete, coherent, and simple understanding of reality" (Carroll, 2005, p. 634), while Brian Greene imagines an ultimate theory as "the firmest foundation on which to build our understanding of the world" (Greene, 1999). But beneath the ambition lurks a sharper question: what would it even mean for explanation to reach the bottom of reality? Can a world made entirely of contingent things ever explain why there is a world at all?

One famous attempt to blunt the mystery is Lawrence Krauss's suggestion that the universe arises from "nothing" (Krauss, 2012). Yet his "nothing" is oddly furnished—it still contains laws, structure, and physical constraint. And once those are in place, the questions simply reassemble themselves: why *those* laws? Why *that* structure? Why anything like laws at all? At a certain point, explanation seems forced into a choice between two very different endings. Either it simply stops for no reason—brute, unexplained, and final—or it bottoms out in something necessary, something that could not have failed to be. Those are fundamentally different cosmogonic pictures.

Now suppose a necessary being actually exists—call it or them "N." We immediately face a fork. Either N is physical, or it is not. If it is physical, then physics itself must eventually absorb necessity into its inventory of what there is, or it is incomplete. But if N is not physical, then even a perfected physics would be haunted by an absence: the

[8] Alexander R. Pruss and Joshua L. Rasmussen, *Necessary Existence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 12-13.

sense that the deepest layer of existence lies beyond its reach. So, if a necessary being exists, then either scientific inquiry is incomplete until it takes account of it, or it is transcended by something beyond the reach of physical science altogether. Either outcome would be highly significant if it turned out to be true.

This question also reshapes ontology itself—the attempt to classify what exists at the most fundamental level. Philosophers often divide reality into the concrete (things that can cause effects) and the abstract (numbers, properties, sets). A familiar temptation follows: abstract entities are necessary, concrete ones contingent. But why? Could necessity ever belong to something concrete? Could there be a thing that could not have failed to exist and *could cause something*? Ontology also gives rise to debates about metaphysical nihilism—the controversial view that it was possible for absolutely nothing to have existed at all. If there are no necessary beings, then everything is contingent, and it may seem that reality could have been entirely empty. But if necessary beings exist, metaphysical nihilism is false from the outset, since total nothingness would have been impossible. In that case, we would arrive at a striking solution to one of philosophy's oldest questions.

Finally, these questions cast theology in a very different light. God is often imagined in highly contingent terms: as a particular kind of mind, a cosmic ruler with a recognizable personality, perspective, appearance, or way of acting—as though divinity were simply an extraordinarily powerful being within reality. But if there is a necessary concrete being, the nature of God, *if* he exists, might be fundamentally different from what traditional conceptions often suggest. A necessary being would not merely be one more entity among others; it would stand at the foundation of causation itself, the reality upon which all contingent existence depends. At the same time, necessity need not automatically imply divinity. Some philosophers instead locate necessity in impersonal foundations—such as a timeless causal *point* or condition underlying the universe (Smith, 2001). The concept of a necessary being is thus more general than the traditional concept of God. Still, the consequences are difficult to ignore. If a necessary concrete being exists, then it becomes hard to maintain that God is merely contingent

upon some deeper layer of reality. Either God is identical with the necessary foundation, or something even more fundamental than God exists. Either way, the question of necessity reaches directly into the deepest architecture of philosophical theology.[9]

Where do we begin? Obviously, to embark on such an investigation, we must know exactly what we're doing. But which framework ought we employ? Here we must begin. Let us consider *modal logic,* the logic of possibility and necessity. Modal logic opens a doorway into the deepest questions of reality, moving us beyond the black-and-white landscape of ordinary truth and falsity. Imagine ordinary logic as a map with a single territory—the actual world. Modal logic, in contrast, reveals an archipelago of islands: each "island" is a possible world, a complete way reality might have unfolded, each with its own unique features, events, and inhabitants. This is the imaginative leap at the heart of **possible world semantics**, pioneered by Saul Kripke. In this framework, a **possible world** is simply a way that it is metaphysically possible that the world can be or could have been. Possible worlds, then, are not mere fictions or science-fiction stories, but rigorous representations of all the ways reality could possibly be, given the broadest (metaphysical) sense of possibility.

Within this metaphysical landscape, we can ask: What is *possible*? What is *necessary*? What is *contingent*? Formally, a statement is **possible** if it is true in *at least one* possible world; it is **necessary** if it is true in *every* possible world. Take, for example, the statement "The sky is blue." In some possible worlds—perhaps worlds with different atmospheric conditions—the sky is green or purple. So, "The sky is blue" is contingent: it is possible, but not necessary. On the other hand, "2+2=4" is true in every possible world, so it is necessary.

It must be understood that by a "possible world" one does *not* mean a planet or even a universe, but rather a maximal description of reality, or a way reality might be. Perhaps the best way to think of a possible world is as a huge conjunction *p & q & r & s…,* whose individual conjuncts are the propositions *p, q, r, s,…* A possible world is a

[9] This overview of the significance of necessary existence across multiple domains is drawn from *Necessary Existence* (2018), pp. 15–22.

conjunction which comprises every proposition or its contradictory, so that it yields a maximal description of reality—nothing is left out of such a description. By negating different conjuncts in a maximal description, we arrive at different possible worlds:

W_1: p & q & r & s ...
W_2: p & $\neg q$ & r & $\neg s$ ...
W_3: $\neg p$ & $\neg q$ & r & s ...
W_4: p & q & $\neg r$ & s ...
…
…
…
…

Only one of these descriptions will be composed of conjuncts all of which are true and so will be the way reality actually is, that is to say, the actual world. Since we're talking about possible worlds, the various conjuncts which a possible world comprises must be capable of being true both individually and together. **Metaphysical possibility** is one of the central types of possibility in modal philosophy. It is the primary form of modality we will use throughout this book. Metaphysical possibility concerns what is genuinely possible or necessary in an *absolute* sense—it is not relativized in any way. It's broader than **physical possibility** (which is limited by the actual laws of nature) but narrower than **strict logical possibility** (which requires only freedom from formal contradiction). The laws of nature themselves are not metaphysically necessary — they could have been otherwise — so metaphysical possibility allows worlds where physics differs from ours. However, metaphysical possibility is not as permissive as strict logical possibility, which can allow scenarios that violate the essential natures of things.

It is also important to distinguish between metaphysical possibility and merely **epistemic possibility**. Epistemic possibility concerns what could be true given what one knows, whereas metaphysical possibility concerns what could *really* be objectively true. In modal logic, however, metaphysical possibility is not just a matter of what happens to be actual in our world; it concerns what is genuinely *possible* across the widest range of coherent ways things could have been. So, something may be epistemically possible simply because our knowledge is incomplete, even if it really turns out to be necessary or impossible. To illustrate: some extraordinarily difficult mathematical equation may be beyond our ability to grasp, and so we say that it's possible that the equation is true and it's possible that it is false. But we thereby merely confess our epistemic uncertainty concerning the equation's truth value. As a piece of mathematics, the equation itself is either necessarily true or necessarily false.

An ordinary detective case also illustrates the difference well. Suppose a locked room contains a shattered vase, and three people had access to the room. Before the evidence is fully examined, it is epistemically possible that any one of the three broke the vase. From the standpoint of the detective's knowledge, several scenarios remain live options. But suppose one of the suspects was actually locked in a prison cell across the country at the time of the crime. To the ignorant detective, it is *epistemically* possible that this suspect is the culprit, but it is *metaphysically* impossible for that person to have been in two places at once.[10] This shows how epistemic possibility merely tracks the boundaries of our ignorance, while metaphysical possibility tracks the boundaries of reality.

A proposition or state of affairs is usually considered at least *prima facie* metaphysically possible if:

[10] One caveat: by saying it is metaphysically impossible for that person to have been in two places at once, I have in mind the law of non-contradiction, not a denial of quantum superposition or of omnipresence in any specialized sense. The point is simply that, in the same time and the same respect, the suspect cannot both be at the crime scene and not be at the crime scene (at least given this context).

1. It is **logically consistent** (contains no contradiction or incoherence) and can be coherently conceived under sustained rational reflection.

2. It **respects the essential natures of things** — the kinds, properties, and identities that necessarily belong to them.

Thus, "the prime minister is a prime number," though strictly logically coherent, is not metaphysically possible because prime numbers are abstract objects and cannot be identical to concrete human beings. Likewise, "Socrates could have been a hippopotamus" is impossible on an essentialist view because Socrates is essentially human, and being a hippopotamus would not be compatible with being *Socrates* in any possible world.

With that in place, we can talk about how to quantify metaphysical necessity and possibility. To keep track of these subtle distinctions, modal logic introduces special operators:

- "□" (box) for necessity ("It is necessary that…"), and
- "◇" (diamond) for possibility ("It is possible that…")

So, "□P" asserts that P is true in all possible worlds; "◇P" asserts that P is true in at least one possible world. Think of these operators as doors: "◇" opens a door to another world where P is true; "□" means you can open any door, and P will greet you every time.

Yet not all modal logics are created equal. There are many possible "rules of the game," each system with different assumptions about how worlds connect. The system called **S5** is widely treated as the standard for alethic, metaphysical modality—the most general kind of possibility and necessity, unconstrained by the limits of knowledge, physical law, or perspective. Metaphysical necessity can be understood as attaching to propositions (*de dicto*), or as asserting that a particular entity necessarily instantiates a given property (*de re*).[11]

[11] See James Garson, "Modal Logic," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified December 27, 2023; Boris Kment, "Varieties of Modality," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified March 15, 2021; Michael Nelson,

System S5 is distinguished by a set of foundational axioms—rules that tell us how necessity and possibility behave. Here are the central ones:

K (Distribution): $\Box(P \rightarrow Q) \rightarrow (\Box P \rightarrow \Box Q)$ *If it is necessary that P implies Q, then if P is necessary, so is Q.*
T (Reflexivity): $\Box P \rightarrow P$ *If something is necessary, then it is actually the case.*
4 (Transitivity): $\Box P \rightarrow \Box\Box P$ *If something is necessary, then it is necessarily necessary.*
B (Symmetry): $P \rightarrow \Box\Diamond P$ *If something is the case, then it is necessarily possible.*
S5 Axiom (If P is possibly necessary, P is necessary): $\Diamond\Box P \rightarrow \Box P$ *If it is possible that P is necessary, then P is, in fact, necessary.*

K and T are virtually axiomatic. 4 is also highly intuitive, if you think about it. If something is already necessary, then it's necessarily necessary. It cannot be contingently (possibly not) necessary, or else that would mean it could fail to be necessary and thus fail to hold, which contradicts its necessity in the first place! To illustrate the plausibility of Axiom 4 (S4), consider the following exchange:

"Propositional Attitude Reports," supplement, "The De Re/De Dicto Distinction," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified July 18, 2024; Bob Hale, "S5 as the Logic of Metaphysical Modality: Two Arguments for and Two Arguments Against," in *Essence and Existence: Selected Essays*, ed. Jessica Leech and Kit Fine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 141–48.

Aang: It is necessarily true that 2 + 2 = 4, and that anything with a shape must also have a size.
Zach: Nope! Those things could have failed to be necessary. Maybe, in some other possible world, 2 + 2 = 5.
Aang: Wait… are you serious? But—
Zach: Absolutely. In another possible world—one where I actually ate a decent breakfast this morning—3 + 3 = 24.

The humor aside, the dialogue highlights an important point: if something is genuinely metaphysically necessary in the strongest sense, then it cannot merely *happen* to be necessary while still possibly failing to be so. Necessity is not contingent. If it is necessary that 2 + 2 = 4, or that triangles have three sides, then by definition there is no possible world whatsoever in which those truths cease to hold. In other words, genuinely necessary truths are not just necessary—they are *necessarily* necessary.

As for Brouwer, or B, this also seems quite clear. If something is already genuinely the case, then there's simply *no way* it could somehow be impossible! Could your existence somehow be impossible, even though you're already here? We can think of the Brouwer Axiom as an axiom of mutual recognition. If another possible world doesn't recognize our world as a possibility, we're not going to recognize that world as a possibility. Actualities are surely possible in the strongest available relevant sense, and so such a world's criteria of possibility are simply wrong—and a world whose modal logic is wrong is an impossible world.

To illustrate the Brouwer axiom, consider the actual fact that the videogame Pac-Man exists. Now imagine another possible world where Goku exists (if only!). While relaxing on King Kai's planet, he thinks to himself:

"Man, I wish there were a videogame where a yellow circle runs around eating stuff while fleeing from ghosts. That would be amazing! Too bad such a thing is absolutely impossible. No coherent world could ever contain a game like that."

Could Goku be right? Obviously not. The very fact that Pac-Man actually exists is decisive proof that it is not impossible. And more than that: it *can't* be impossible, because if it were impossible, it could not exist in the actual world in the first place.[12]

The last axiom, distinctive to S5, reveals the depth of S5's commitment to unrestricted metaphysical possibility. It says that if it's possible for something to be necessary, then it is already necessary—there are no "hidden pockets" of necessity that apply only from one vantage point but not from all.

Notice that not just any proposition counts as "possibly necessary." One couldn't say, for example, that the proposition "my sandwich exists" is even possibly necessary, since we clearly know of metaphysically possible worlds where that sandwich is absent. For a proposition to count as possibly necessary, there must be a possible world where it holds necessarily—that is, a possible world where the proposition is somehow fundamentally anchored in logic, essence, or identity.

How do these axioms build S5? Each axiom adds a layer of structure to the "roads" connecting possible worlds:

- K ensures logical coherence, so necessity distributes across logical implications.
- T says every world can "see" itself; if something is necessary, it must be true here and now.
- 4 ensures that necessity "sticks" across worlds; if something is necessary, it's necessarily necessary.
- B adds symmetry: if something is true, then from any world's perspective, its possibility is guaranteed.
- The S5 axiom, or 5, clinches the system by closing the gap between possible necessity and outright necessity, ensuring

[12] Remember that, in modal logic, for something to be *impossible* is simply for it to be *necessarily false*. Symbolically: Impossible(p) ≡ $\Box\neg p$
That is, there is not even a single possible world in which p obtains.

that necessity is fully global, not parochial to just some vantage points.

Notice that one *cannot* accept the first four of these axioms and *still* deny S5, because S5 is directly derived from them. Many logicians and philosophers consider the axioms to be nearly axiomatic (no pun intended), and any attempt to refute them would have to also repair *significant collateral damage* to modal logic. Mathematically, these axioms force the "accessibility relation" between possible worlds to be an **equivalence relation**: every world is accessible from every other (reflexive, symmetric, and transitive). In plain terms: if you imagine stepping from one possible world to another, you can always step in any direction, as often as you want, and return to where you started. There are no "locked doors" between worlds.

But, we must consider, could there be objections to S5 or one of its constituent axioms? **Before we go on, note that the objections in this section, and the responses to them, are somewhat more technical and can be skipped with no loss of continuity.** Roderick Chisholm proposes a challenge to S4 by imagining a sequence of possible worlds $w_1, \ldots, w_n$. The first world, w_1, is the actual world containing Adam and Noah. Each successive world differs only slightly from the previous one, so that Adam and Noah become incrementally more similar to each other. In the final world w_n, everything is qualitatively just as it is in the actual world, except that Adam and Noah have exchanged identities: the individual called "Noah" is outwardly identical to the actual Noah but is in fact Adam, and vice versa.[13]

It seems plausible that each step in this sequence is possible relative to the preceding one, since it is surely possible for Adam and Noah to have been only slightly different. If S4 holds, however, then the fact that each world is possible relative to the previous one implies that the final world w_n is simply possible. But this result appears implausible: it seems absurd to suppose that the world could be exactly as it is while

[13] Roderick Chisholm. "Identity through Possible Worlds: Some Questions." In: *Noûs* 1 (1967), pp. 1–8.

Adam and Noah are nonetheless swapped. If w_n is impossible, then S4 (and hence S5) must be false.

This argument depends crucially on rejecting the possibility of worlds that differ only with respect to the identities—or haecceities—of individuals. Some philosophers, however, reject this intuition. For example, Swinburne holds that it is plausible that one person could have lived another's life, and thus would accept the possibility of w_n. This position amounts to **haecceitism**[14], the view that worlds can differ solely in which individual instantiates which qualitative role.

Pruss and Rasmussen argue that denying S4 on the basis of anti-haecceitist intuitions is a mistake. To see why, consider a simpler case. Suppose the actual world contains two identical twins, Castor and Pollux, who differ only in that Castor has a scratch and Pollux does not. It seems clearly possible that there is a world just like the actual one except that the scratch is switched. If that world is possible, then two worlds differing only haecceitistically are both possible at the actual world. Since the actual world itself is possible, haecceitism is therefore possible—and it is implausible to regard haecceitism as merely contingently false. Thus, anyone who accepts the small-variation intuition that motivates Chisholm's premise should also accept haecceitism, and so should not reject S4 on these grounds.

Moreover, the appeal to stepwise possibility does not uniquely threaten S4. The same intuitive reasoning supports an even weaker principle: if one world is possible, then a slightly different world is also possible. From this principle alone, repeated application yields the possibility of w_n without invoking any modal axioms at all. Hence, either we accept haecceitism and allow that w_n is possible, or we reject the small-variation intuition entirely. In neither case does the argument undermine S4.[15]

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[14] Haecceity is the property or quality that makes something uniquely itself and not anything else; it is the "thisness" that individuates an object.

[15] A similar objection applies to Nathan Salmon's (1984) argument against S4. Salmon's argument relies on two claims: (a) an object that originated from a chunk of matter α could not have originated from a completely non-overlapping chunk β, and (b) if an object originated from α, then it could also have originated from any

An alternative response rejects haecceitism by grounding transworld identity in causal history. On this view, an object in one world is identical to an object in another only if their origins and initial states are exactly the same. This blocks Chisholm-style identity swaps, but at the cost of endorsing a strong essentiality-of-origin thesis and an identity-of-indiscernibles for historical properties. Pruss and Rasmussen argue that, despite these costs, the historical theory has significant explanatory advantages: it avoids haecceitism, explains asymmetries in counterfactual dependence over time, allows a Fregean treatment of existence, enables the reduction of *de re* modality to *de dicto* claims, and permits meaningful propositions about non-existent objects.

In sum, whether one adopts haecceitism or a historical theory of identity, Chisholm's argument does not succeed in undermining S4 (and therefore S5). Both approaches provide coherent and well-motivated responses to the "slight modification" objection.

Consider another objection. Existentialism about propositions holds that there cannot be propositions *about* non-existent entities—specifically, that there are no *de re* propositions whose subjects fail to exist.[16] Pruss and Rasmussen argue that, if adopted, existentialism appears to generate serious problems for both S4 and the Brouwer axiom.

The problem arises from combining existentialism with standard assumptions about necessity, truth, and existence. Roughly, the existentialist holds that if a proposition is true, then that proposition must exist; and if a proposition exists, then its subject must exist as

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chunk sufficiently similar to α. Given S4 and a plausible series of overlapping chunks connecting α and β, these claims generate a contradiction, leading Salmon to reject S4. However, claim (b) is no more plausible than the following alternative: (b') if an object *could* have originated from α, then it could also have originated from any chunk sufficiently similar to α. Yet the same style of reasoning that derives a contradiction from (a), (b), and S4 can also derive a contradiction from (a) and (b') alone, without appealing to any modal axioms. Since (b) is not clearly more plausible than (b'), the argument ultimately targets not S4 itself, but the conjunction of (a) and (b).

[16] Alvin Plantinga. "On Existentialism." In: *Philosophical Studies* 44 (1983), pp. 1–20.

well. When these assumptions are combined with familiar modal principles, they yield implausible results.

For example, consider the tautology *Socrates = Socrates*. It is necessarily true. But if necessity implies the necessary existence of the corresponding proposition, and if the existence of that proposition requires Socrates to exist, then it follows that Socrates exists necessarily. This contradicts the uncontroversial claim that Socrates does not exist necessarily. From this contradiction, existentialists conclude that S4 must be false.

A parallel argument targets the Brouwer axiom. Starting from the fact that Socrates exists, existentialists reason that if Brouwer holds, then it is necessarily possible that Socrates exists. But existentialist assumptions again lead from this claim to the conclusion that Socrates exists necessarily—contradicting the same premise as before. Hence Brouwer must also be rejected.

Pruss and Rasmussen argue that these conclusions are far too strong. The problem does not lie with S4 or Brouwer, but with certain *existentialist assumptions* about truth. In particular, existentialists must reject unrestricted principles linking necessity to truth and truth to existence. Indeed, existentialists are *already* forced to reject such principles independently of any modal commitments. Otherwise, even harmless tautologies involving singular terms would entail the necessary existence of their subjects.

The issue can also be illustrated using possible-worlds semantics. If worlds are treated as collections of propositions, and propositions cannot exist without their subjects, then any world in which Socrates does not exist would fail to contain propositions about Socrates—and thus would not exist as a world. Let w be a possible world in which Socrates is absent. In such a world it should be true that Socrates does not exist. But existentialism about propositions implies that propositions about Socrates can exist *only* if Socrates exists. Hence, if Socrates does not exist in w, the proposition *Socrates does not exist* cannot exist in w. Yet, according to existentialism, a proposition cannot be true in a world in which it does not exist. Therefore, if existentialism

is correct, the proposition *Socrates does not exist* cannot be true in any world in which Socrates is absent.

But this result is unacceptable. If Socrates fails to exist in some possible world, then it must be true in that world that Socrates does not exist. Since existentialism entails that such a proposition cannot be true in worlds where Socrates is absent, it follows that existentialism rules out the possibility of Socrates' nonexistence altogether. In effect, the view collapses into the absurd consequence that no possible world can correctly represent Socrates as failing to exist. The problem therefore lies not with modal principles such as S4 or Brouwer, but with the existentialist restriction on propositions, which prevents worlds from containing true claims about the nonexistence of contingent individuals.

This leads to absurd consequences: accessibility would fail to be reflexive or symmetric, undermining even the most basic modal axioms such as T. Since this result is unacceptable, existentialism—not S4 or Brouwer—must be revised or abandoned. Pruss and Rasmussen conclude that existentialists face a choice. Either they must allow that propositions can be necessary without *existing* necessarily, or they must revise how truth-at-a-world is understood. These problems disappear entirely if existentialism about propositions is rejected, for example by adopting haecceitism or a historical theory of identity.

But there's yet *another*, perhaps even more intuitive way to validly derive S5. One may simply use three axioms: **K, T, and 5.**

Axiom 5: What is possible (consistent with the truths of reason) cannot be impossible (inconsistent with the truths of reason).

In other words, $\Diamond P \rightarrow \Box\Diamond P$. If P is possible, then P is necessarily possible. "Consistent with the truths of reason" simply means "does not contradict anything that is necessary." That is, it neither is nor entails any strict logical contradiction or violation of essential natures. In essence, it meets the criteria for being metaphysically possible.

What Axiom 5 is really saying, to put it simply, is that "Whatever is *consistent* with necessary truths cannot be *inconsistent* with necessary truths." That is to say, logic and metaphysical possibility is consistent

with *itself.* So, for example, it is a *necessary* truth that a square has four sides. Saying "paint the square red" or "place the square on the table" is always *consistent* with that truth. These actions never cause the square to stop having four sides, so they cannot ever conflict with the necessary geometric fact. Additionally, it is a necessary truth that two plus two equals four. If a child says, "I have two apples and I got two more, so now I have four," that statement is entirely consistent with the arithmetic truth. Because the scenario uses the rule correctly, it cannot contradict the rule—it simply instantiates it. To illustrate the intuitive force of Axiom 5, consider the following exchange:

Trunks: Man, Samsung is really on fire this year. Have you seen the kinds of devices they're making? They even built a phone that folds out into something like a tablet.

Po: That's wild. Imagine if they made a phone that folded twice, so you could unfold it into an even bigger screen.

Trunks: Honestly, I could see that happening. The idea makes sense, and the technology seems totally within reach.

Po: Uh, sorry, Trunks, but absolutely not.

Trunks: What do you mean?

Po: I was joking around. A device like that is impossible in the strongest possible sense. Not just unlikely — fundamentally incoherent.

Trunks: Bro… why?

Po: Oh, gonna cry?

Now suppose Trunks is really correct that a trifold Samsung device is metaphysically possible. Could Po nevertheless also be correct that such a device is absolutely impossible? Clearly not.

The point is stronger than merely saying that if Trunks is right, then Po just happens to be mistaken. Rather, if Trunks is genuinely correct, then Po cannot possibly be correct. If the device is possible, then it *cannot* also be impossible. The two claims are mutually exclusive. In other words, if Trunks' proposal is genuinely possible, then it is necessarily

possible. It cannot simultaneously be absolutely impossible. In the language of possible-world semantics, if a world is genuinely possible, then its possibility is an objective fact. The inability of another possible world to recognize this does not make that world "special" or "nuanced"; it simply means that the world is mistaken. It treats as impossible something that is, in fact, objectively possible. Consequently, its criteria for possibility are defective, and a world operating with defective modal logic is itself an impossible world.

Across empirical science, mathematics, and computer science, we routinely rely—often implicitly—on a principle mirroring modal Axiom 5: genuine possibility is not a fragile, local accident, but a property that is stable under reflection.[17] If a state of affairs is genuinely possible, its possibility is itself necessary; what is *really possible* cannot coherently become *absolutely impossible* simply by shifting our vantage point. In empirical science, this stability ensures that physically admissible scenarios remain admissible across all consistent extensions of a theory, preventing experimental inference from collapsing into a patchwork of isolated, non-transferable facts.[18] In mathematics, if a structure is demonstrably possible within a coherent axiomatic system, that possibility cannot be erased merely by adopting a new perspective within the framework, lest the universal stability of proof be undermined.[19]

Similarly, in computer science and software verification, if a computational state is reachable under the rules of a system, that reachability remains invariant across equivalent representations,

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[17] Roy Dyckhoff and Sara Negri, "Geometrisation of First-Order Logic," *Bulletin of Symbolic Logic* 21, no. 2 (2015): 123–163.

[18] See Tal, Eran, "Measurement in Science", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/measurement-science/; William C. Wimsatt, "Robustness, Reliability, and Overdetermination," in *Scientific Inquiry and the Social Sciences*, ed. Marvin B. Brewer and Barry E. Collins (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1981); Léna Soler, Emiliano Trizio, Thomas Nickles, and William C. Wimsatt, eds., *Characterizing the Robustness of Science: After the Practice Turn in Philosophy of Science* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012).

[19] See Jeremy Avigad, "The Epsilon Calculus," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (rev. Jul. 18, 2024), §§1–3; Benjamin Eastaugh, "Reverse Mathematics," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2024).

allowing us to reliably prove program correctness and termination.[20] Even in economics and systems theory, the analysis of equilibria demands that valid possibilities are not capriciously revoked by a change in descriptive level.[21] If we were to reject this modal stability at the fundamental level of metaphysics—conceding that something could be genuinely possible yet also impossible—we risk importing a profound incoherence into these disciplines. The very act of reasoning about possibility would cease to be transportable across contexts, fracturing the logic of inference, proof, and computation, and reducing these structured forms of inquiry into mere local games of description. The claim is not merely that our models are stable, but that the intelligibility of possibility itself—whether physical, mathematical, or computational—*presupposes* this invariance.

The denial of such an axiom, if taken seriously across the board, would probably destroy, or at least cast significant doubt on, *all* rational inquiry. From K, T, and 5 alone (plus the regular logical rules of inference), modal logicians are able to validly derive the theorem $\Diamond\Box P \rightarrow \Box P$. That is exactly S5.

Here is *another* line of thought leading to S5. Assume a standard possible-worlds semantics for modality. Different theories identify possible worlds with different kinds of entities—maximal states of affairs, concrete universes, or abstract structures[22]—but these

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[20] See Kathi Fisler and Moshe Y. Vardi, "Bisimulation and Model Checking" (Rice University technical report, 1999); Davide Sangiorgi, "On the Origins of Bisimulation and Coinduction," *ACM Transactions on Programming Languages and Systems* (technical article); Daniel Kroening, "Software Verification," in *Handbook of Satisfiability* (2008), chap. 2; Byron Cook, Andreas Podelski, and Andrey Rybalchenko, "Termination Proofs for Systems Code" (2006).

[21] See Hichem Ben-El-Mechaiekh, Philippe Bich, and Monique Florenzano, "General Equilibrium and Fixed Point Theory: A Partial Survey," *Documents de travail du Centre d'Economie de la Sorbonne* 09051 (2009); Ken Urai, "Fixed Point Theorems and the Existence of Economic Equilibria Based on Conditions for Local Directions of Mappings," in *Advances in Mathematical Economics* 2 (1999): 87–118.

[22] See Christopher Menzel, "Possible Worlds," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, esp. secs. 2.2.1–2.3.3; Michael Textor, "States of Affairs," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, esp. sec. 4; Robert C. Stalnaker, "Possible Worlds," *Noûs* 10, no. 1 (1976): 65–75; David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); and Robert Goldblatt, "Mathematical Modal Logic: A View of Its Evolution," *Journal of Applied Logic* 1, nos. 5–6 (2003): 309–392.

differences will not matter here. What matters is that worlds are treated as *possible* unless there is good reason to say otherwise.

Without S5, however, at least one of two problematic outcomes must be accepted:

1. **Impossible worlds are included among the worlds**, or
2. **The actual world is privileged in an unexplained way**, having access to more possibilities than other worlds.

To see why, let W be the set of worlds used in the semantics, and for each world w, let A_w be the proposition that w is actual. If all worlds in W are genuinely possible, then each A_w is possibly true. Now, if every world in W is possible *at every other world*, then the accessibility relation connects all worlds to one another, making it reflexive, symmetric, and transitive—exactly what S5 requires.

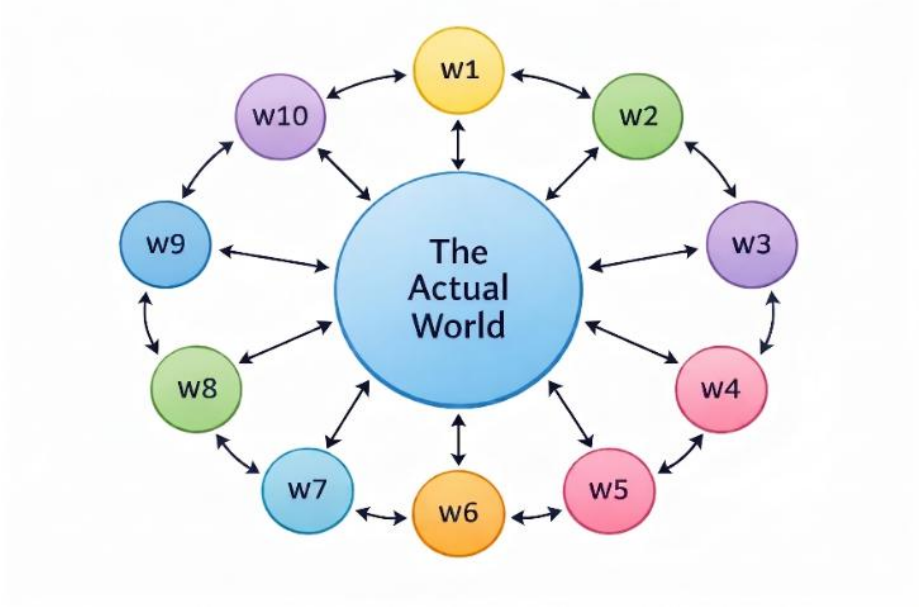

Figure illustrating an equivalence relation over possible worlds: every world—including the actual world—is mutually accessible to every other world.

If, however, all worlds are possible but not all are accessible from one another, then the actual world must be special: it must be a world at which *all* worlds are possible, while some other worlds *lack* this feature.[23] This would mean that the actual world is among those that enjoy a uniquely maximal range of possibilities for no clear reason. Such privileging is highly implausible.

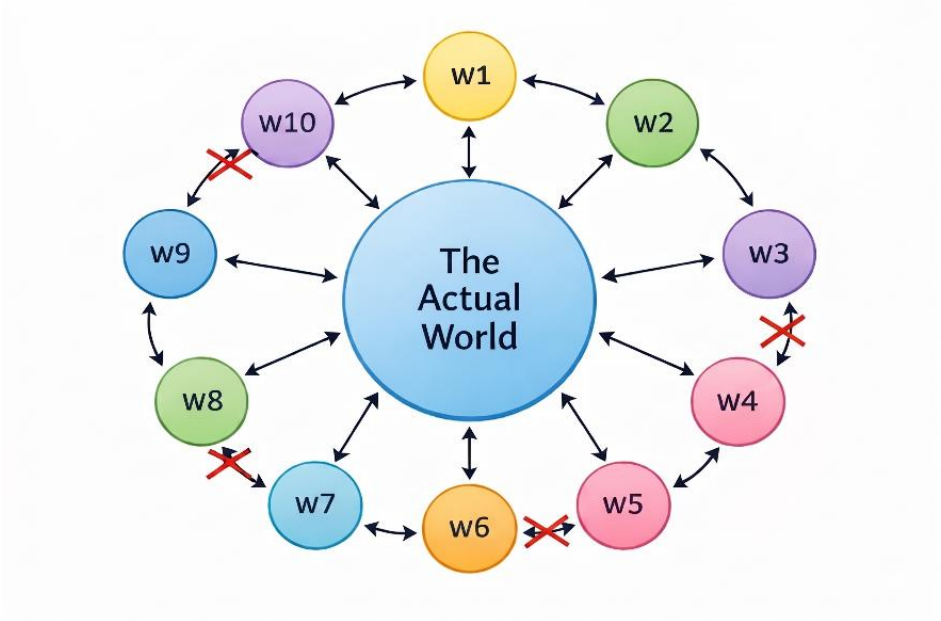

Figure illustrating a fragmented accessibility structure among possible worlds, in which not all worlds are mutually accessible. In such a framework, one must either admit "impossible" worlds (by crossing out an arrow from the actual world to another possible world) or else posit an unexplained privileging of the actual world within the modal structure (as shown above).

[23] Notice that if a purported "possible world" is absolutely inaccessible from the actual world, then its status as genuinely possible is undermined. A merely conceptual construction that bears no modal connection to actuality does not plausibly count as a real possibility.

Hence, unless we accept impossible worlds in our *possible* worlds semantics, or an unexplained asymmetry favoring the actual world, we should accept S5.

Here is a final line of thought leading to S5. Start with a very plausible principle:

(3) If accessibility among non-actual possible worlds forms an equivalence relation, then accessibility among *all* possible worlds does as well.

It would be deeply implausible if the accessibility relation behaved perfectly regularly everywhere except at the actual world. Next, consider an intuitive constraint on necessity: we cannot make a contingent truth necessary merely by bringing about some possible state of affairs. More precisely:

(4) If p is contingently true, then there is no possibly true proposition q such that q entails that p is necessary.

Now let A_w again be the proposition that world w is actual. Fix two non-actual possible worlds w_1 and w_2, and suppose for contradiction that w_2 is not accessible from w_1. Let p be the proposition that w_2 is not actual, and let q be the proposition that w_1 is actual.

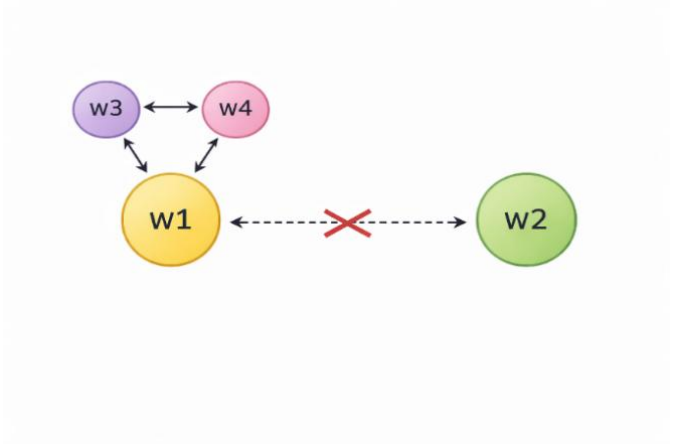

Figure illustrating a possible world (w1) from which another possible world (w2) is not accessible.

Since w_2 is not accessible from w_1, p is true at all worlds accessible from w_1, which makes p necessary at w_1. But q is possible and entails that p is necessary, even though p is contingently true—contradicting principle (4).

Thus, any non-actual possible world must be accessible from any other. By (3), accessibility over all possible worlds is therefore an equivalence relation.

Therefore, under standard Kripkean semantics, rejecting S5 forces one to accept either impossible worlds or an implausible asymmetry privileging the actual world, and conflicts with the intuitive idea that contingent truths cannot be made necessary by possible events. Together, these considerations strongly support S5 as the correct logic of metaphysical modality.

Finally, let us return and bring the analogy home: imagine all possible worlds as rooms in an infinite mansion. In some modal logics, certain doors between rooms are locked (you can get to some worlds, but not all, from a given room). In S5, every door between every pair of rooms is unlocked; you can walk freely from any room to any other, and every room has the same set of possibilities on offer. If, peradventure, you find a necessary thing in even a single room through the back door, you're guaranteed that it's everywhere (even if it's not always easy to see), including *here* (the actual world). This models the metaphysical sense that what's possible or necessary isn't dependent on where you "stand" in the mansion of worlds—possibility and necessity are truly universal.

Why does S5 matter? For metaphysical modality—the study of what is possible or necessary in the broadest sense—S5 captures our deepest intuitions. We don't want possibility or necessity to be relative to particular vantage points, as in physical or epistemic modality. Instead, we want the rules of *reality itself*: necessity as that which could not be otherwise, and possibility as that which could have been otherwise, regardless of which world we start from. S5, supported by Kripke's possible world semantics, is robust, valid, and *widely accepted* among philosophers as the ideal logical system for this metaphysical investigation. Most objections to S5 come from other types of modality

(e.g., epistemic, deontic).[24] Timothy Williamson, though being skeptical of S5 for epistemic modality, goes so far as to say that "Plausible closure conditions on the family of objective modalities are shown to entail that the logic of metaphysical necessity *is* S5… metaphysical necessity itself satisfies the strong modal logic S5."[25] Similarly, philosophy professor Trevor Teitel at Stanford University, in a detailed analysis of modality and essence, notes that "The theorems of S5 are widely regarded as non-negotiable constraints governing metaphysical modality."[26] Regarding his own view, he concludes that "I take at least the theorems of B, and likely also the theorems of S4, and hence the theorems of S5, as non-negotiable constraints governing metaphysical modality."

Juhani Yli-Vakkuri and John Hawthorne, in their analysis of the necessity of mathematics, found that "mathematics, it turns out, is committed to all theorems of the modal system S5 that are expressible in mathematical language—S5 being the system that is widely thought to capture the logic of metaphysical modality… *Every theorem of the modal system S5 that is expressible in the language of mathematics is provable in mathematics.* In effect, mathematics contains within itself the system S5. Since philosophical consensus holds that the logic of metaphysical modality is S5, this means that mathematics is at least as opinionated as philosophical consensus about the application of principles of modal logic to mathematics."[27] It is a *formally proven system* from foundational axioms.

Modal logic and S5 open the door to a rigorous and awe-inspiring landscape: not just a single reality, but a cosmos of all possible realities. They allow us to ask, with precision and clarity, what must be true, what could have been different, and what it means for something to be

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[24] For a more thorough explication of S5's foundations, plus rigorous responses to several "de re" objections, see Pruss and Rasmussen's *Necessary Existence* (2018).
[25] Timothy Williamson, "Modal Science," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 46, no. 4–5 (2016): 453–492, emphasis added.
[26] Trevor Teitel, "Contingent Existence and the Reduction of Modality to Essence," *Mind* (2019): pp. 3, 27-28, URL: https://philpapers.org/archive/TEICEA.pdf.
[27] Juhani Yli-Vakkuri and John Hawthorne, *The Necessity of Mathematics*, University of Tartu and University of Southern California (2018), pp. 5-12, URL: https://philarchive.org/archive/YLITNO?.

necessary or contingent—not just in one world, but across the total sweep of metaphysical possibility. The archipelago of possible worlds, navigated by the open doors of S5, reveals that metaphysical necessity is not the law of one room, but of the *entire* mansion of existence.

If you are still having trouble grasping all of this from the first time, that is quite normal! Take your time, look at everything, and try to make analogies in your mind. Master these before you move on to the next chapter.[28] We're ready to hit the ground running!

[28] For the interested reader, there is a full formal derivation of S5 in Part E of the Appendix.

II. The Answer

"Reality cannot be found except in One single source, because of the interconnection of all things with one another."
—G.W. Leibniz

We now arrive at one of the central pillars of our journey—an investigation that is as rigorous as it is inspiring. This chapter marks a turning point. Here, we will carefully unfold and examine a metaphysical argument that carries immense weight and consequence: the Modal Argument from Beginnings, or MAB for short. This argument, meticulously articulated by philosophers Alexander Pruss and Joshua Rasmussen, stands upon both the shoulders of twentieth-century advances in modal logic and the classical arguments of Natural Theology. It is not a casual speculation, but a carefully constructed proof—uniting deep philosophical insight with precise logical structure. After analyzing MAB, we will make a set of near-deductive inferences on the basis of its conclusion, called "Independent Bridges."

But an argument of this magnitude cannot go unchallenged. Major objections have been leveled against it, each raising a unique concern or attempting an escape. We will not gloss over these challenges. Instead, we shall confront them head-on, one by one, testing the argument's resilience, asking whether its structure bends or breaks under the weight of criticism. Only after this rigorous trial will we step back and survey the terrain—asking what escape routes, if any, truly remain for those who would resist the argument's pull. Here is the Modal Argument from Beginnings (MAB):

1. For any positive state of affairs *S* that can begin to obtain, it's at least metaphysically possible for there to be something external to *S* that causes *S* to obtain.

2. It is at least possible for there to be a beginning of the positive state of affairs of its being the case that there exist contingent concrete things.

3. If (1) and (2) are true, then it is possible that there is a necessary concrete thing.

4. It's possible that there is a necessary concrete thing.

5. If it's possible that there is a necessary concrete thing, then there is a necessary concrete thing (S5 axiom).

6. Therefore, there is a necessary concrete thing (from 4 and 5).

That's it![29] This argument is deductively valid: given S5 modal logic, the conclusion follows logically and necessarily from the first two premises. Moreover, because the argument is *modal* in form, anyone who denies the conclusion must hold that at least one of the first two premises is not merely false, but outright *impossible*. With that in mind, let us examine the first premise more closely.

[29] To see MAB in formal symbols, see Part E of the Appendix.

Premise 1: "For any positive state of affairs S that can begin to obtain, it's at least metaphysically possible for there to be something external to S that causes S to obtain."

First, a few definitions. Let's look at how Pruss and Rasmussen (the creators of the argument) define "positive," "begin to obtain," and "external cause."

Pruss and Rasmussen begin by identifying that "A state of affairs is *positive* if and only if it specifies how things *are*, not how things *aren't*. So, for example, its being the case that there is a coffee cup on my desk is a positive state of affairs, whereas my coffee cup having no lid doesn't count as positive. The notion of "positive" need not be perfectly precise for our purposes and isn't based on axiological considerations. The advantage of focusing on positive states of affairs is that such states are familiar participants in causal explanations. (We leave it open whether negative states of affairs may also be causable.)"[30] Notice that by restricting our attention to *positive states of affairs*, we avoid application to paradoxical cases such as the specific state of affairs of being an "uncaused event." Being uncaused is at least partly a negative or privative description—it specifies the *absence* of a cause—and therefore does not, strictly speaking, qualify as a positive state of affairs.[31]

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[30] *Necessary Existence* (2018), Pruss and Rasmussen, 146.

[31] One might object that states of affairs are not always cleanly positive or negative, since some may seem mixed or difficult to classify, but this is acceptable for present purposes. Premise (1) is concerned only with states of affairs that can begin to obtain and that are *clearly positive* in the sense that they coherently describe how things are rather than how things are not—for example, *there is a chemical bond between hydrogen and oxygen in molecule X*, *there is an owl in a nest*, *there is a galaxy*, *there is a coffee cup on a desk*, *there is a planet with rings*, or *there is a neuron firing in a brain*. By contrast, negative states of affairs involve absences or failures of some condition, such as *there is no light in a room*, *there is no sound in a space*, *there is no object on a surface*, or *there are no birds in a forest*. Some cases may appear mixed or depend on how they are described—for instance, situations involving partial presence, disrupted functioning, or context-sensitive characterizations—but these are set aside. The argument targets only straightforwardly affirmative states of affairs whose obtaining consists in some determinate feature of reality being unambiguously present or instantiated.

What about the other parts? Here, they carefully define the rest: "Begins: A state of affairs s begins to obtain if and only if (i) there is a time at which s obtains, (ii) there is a time or finite interval of time U, such that there is no time prior to U at which s obtains, and (iii) s would not obtain without time. In short, a state of affairs begins to obtain if and only if its obtaining is restricted to a finite interval of time in the past direction.

Consider next the term "external cause." We intend to use the term "cause" in a minimal sense to pick out anything that acts as an antecedent condition (or entity) at least partially causally responsible for some event.[32] We leave specific theories of causation wide open. This definition is compatible with deterministic and indeterministic accounts alike, as well as with sufficient, non-sufficient, and merely partial or contributory forms of causation. It is also compatible with non-deterministically influenced libertarian free choices.[33] An external cause is supposed to be a cause that isn't included in its effect. To be more precise, let us say that a given cause c of s counts as external to s if and only if the following counterfactual fails to hold: if s were to fail to obtain, then c would fail to exist. So, for example, if a bird makes a nest x, the bird is an external cause of the state of affairs of x existing."[34]

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[32] Here, "antecedent" can be either temporally or simply causally prior, depending on the relevant context. If one desires maximum coverage, then we can say that the term "cause" refers to any antecedent *or simultaneous* condition (or entity) at least partially responsible for some event. This might appear superfluous to some readers, but the definition seems to come in handy in certain unique situations, such as the beginning of the universe, where time itself literally begins. Such a beginning *cannot* have a temporally antecedent cause (since there was no time before it), but it *can* have a cause that is coincident or simultaneous with its beginning. A more mundane illustration, inspired by Immanuel Kant, is that of a heavy metal ball resting on a pillow cushion. The ball causes the effect of a pressure deformation or indentation on the cushion, and the cause is simultaneous with the effect.

[33] That is, even on libertarian views, free actions may have non-deterministic, non-sufficient, partial external causes or influences while remaining genuinely free. For example, a person may freely choose to answer a ringing phone: although the ringing contributes causally to the choice, the agent could have refrained, and the choice remains free, with our minimal definition satisfied.

[34] Ibid, 147-148

Those are the definitions! So, let's think carefully about Premise 1. Now, it's extremely important to understand that Premise 1 is not saying that every positive state of affairs (which begins) *must have*, or even *actually does have,* an external cause. It could be *uncaused or completely brute*. We're talking about mere possibility here.

Any support proffered for a strong causal principle applies at least equally, and arguably *more so*, to this weak causal principle. For positive evidence, consider these five points. I'll end with an analogy.

1) *Inductive generalization* - In both science and everyday life, we constantly apprehend positive states of affairs that begin as *actually* having an external cause. In science, the search for causal explanations of *positive states of affairs that begin to obtain* has been uniformly successful across every domain—physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, cosmology, and beyond—and at every scale, from the quantum to the cosmic. The formation of chemical bonds is explained by electromagnetic interactions and quantum mechanical principles; the ignition of stars is traced to gravitational collapse and nuclear fusion; the emergence of biological traits is accounted for by genetic variation, developmental mechanisms, and natural selection; the onset of diseases is explained through molecular, cellular, and environmental causes; the firing of neurons is causally explained in terms of electrochemical processes; and the appearance of large-scale cosmic structures is explained by initial conditions, physical laws, and gravitational dynamics. In each case, a state of affairs that *did not previously obtain* comes to obtain, and science succeeds precisely by identifying the causal conditions under which this occurs.

Even in cases where a cause has not *yet* been identified, it is rationally and methodologically assumed that a cause exists and will be discovered given sufficient time, conceptual development, and investigative tools. The search for the causes of cancer, the nature of dark matter, the origin of consciousness, and the earliest moments of the universe all proceed under this assumption. This expectation is not speculative; it is the engine that drives large-scale research programs in chemistry, medicine, neuroscience, and theoretical physics. Every

genuine scientific discovery and explanatory success thus stands as an implicit vindication of Premise 1.

Accordingly, Premise 1 enjoys extraordinarily broad inductive support from the entire scientific enterprise. This is not a fallacious inference from parts to a whole, but the very form of sound *inductive* reasoning upon which science itself depends. The cumulative success of science therefore functions as powerful indirect inductive confirmation of Premise 1.

The virtually unbroken track record across all disciplines is quite impressive. But, crucially, the weak causal principle doesn't even require *actuality*, but only mere *possibility*. Inductive generalization is thus much safer with this weak causal principle. To give an analogy, imagine you're riding through a neighborhood, and you notice that the roofs of all the houses are blue. You're about to turn into another corner of the neighborhood and see new roofs. Now, it might be risky to inductively generalize that those houses you're about to see actually have blue roofs (analogously to a strong causal principle), but consider the alternative. You could inductively generalize that it's at least *possible* that the houses you're about to see have blue roofs. If those roofs turn out to be special and actually red, then your possibility principle still stays intact. The *mere possibility* remains.

Moreover, throughout the entirety of human history and scientific investigation, we have never observed anything come into existence uncaused from literally *nothing*—where “nothing” is understood as the complete absence of anything whatsoever: no space, no time, no matter, no quantum fields, and not even unrealized potentialities. Such a uniformity of experience seems to lend at least some support to the idea that positive states of affairs which begin to obtain typically have external causes. Even so, the premise under discussion remains compatible with the possibility that some beginnings are uncaused; it does not rule out such cases in principle.

We should nevertheless ask whether there might be a competing principle that enjoys comparable inductive support. Consider, for instance, the principle that *every concrete thing is contingent*. All of the concrete objects with which we are familiar appear to be contingent.

One might therefore infer, by inductive generalization, that every concrete thing *whatsoever* is contingent, and hence that no necessary being exists. This conclusion could then be turned into an argument against our causal principle by adding the further premise that any explanation of the totality of contingent concrete things must appeal to a necessary being.

Despite their superficial similarity, there are important differences between this inductive argument and the one supporting our weak causal principle. First, even if necessary concreta exist, our sensory faculties may be incapable of detecting them *as such*. Our senses are plausibly limited to detecting spatial and material objects; some spatial objects are contingent; and differences in spatial properties—such as size, shape, or location—are irrelevant to whether something exists necessarily. Moreover, a necessary concrete entity might not be strictly spatiotemporal in character. Indeed, several leading approaches in quantum cosmology and quantum gravity treat spacetime itself as emergent from a deeper causal or ontological foundation.[35] As a result, the fact that all concreta *observed* by humans are thought to be contingent provides little evidence that *all* concreta *must* be contingent. By contrast, if a concrete object—say, a blue sphere—were to come into existence completely uncaused before our eyes, its appearance would be directly observable.

Second, even if we were to encounter a necessary being, it is unclear how we could infer its *necessity* on the basis of observation alone. Discovering that an object cannot be destroyed or altered by *us* does not automatically warrant the conclusion that it exists in all possible worlds. For these reasons, we should expect our observations to look exactly as they do if there *are* necessary concreta. The alleged absence of directly observed necessary beings therefore carries little evidential weight against their existence.

By contrast, we have no comparable reason to expect our observations to be as they are if the weak causal principle were false, or if it were

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[35] Robert De Mello Koch and Jeff Murugan, "Emergent Spacetime," in *Foundations of Space and Time*, ed. Jeff Murugan, Amanda Weltman, and George F. R. Ellis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 23–24, doi:10.1017/CBO9780511920998.009.

truly *impossible* for some positive states of affairs (which begin) to have causes. Moreover, science *methodologically depends* on something like the weak causal principle, whereas it does *not* depend on the falsity of necessary concreta. Consequently, while the parallel inductive argument calls for caution, the asymmetry between the two cases undermines its force.

2) ***A priori intuition*** - For any *positive state of affairs S* that can *begin to obtain*, it is both *prima facie* intuitive and *readily conceivable* that there could be something *external to S* that causes *S* to obtain. When we consider an arbitrary beginning—a particle decay, the ignition of a flame, the onset of a storm, the formation of a thought, the emergence of a biological structure—it is entirely natural to ask why it occurred rather than failed to occur, and to conceive of prior or contemporaneous conditions that bring it about. Nothing in the very concept of a positive beginning appears to exclude, on pain of contradiction, the possibility of an external cause. On the contrary, the notion of a beginning seems to invite causal explanation.

This matters because *conceivability*, while not decisive, provides *defeasible evidence* of *metaphysical possibility*. If a scenario is coherently conceivable—free of logical contradiction, conceptual incoherence, or category mistake—then we have at least some reason to think it corresponds to a genuinely possible way reality could have been. Importantly, the present claim is modest: it does not assert that every positive beginning *must* have an external cause, but only that it is *metaphysically possible* for such a cause to exist. That is a low and reasonable modal bar, and conceivability clears it with ease.

Of course, conceivability alone is not infallible; there are well-known cases in which what seems conceivable turns out to be metaphysically impossible. But the role of conceivability here is not to bear the full argumentative weight. Rather, it functions as a *sanity check* and a *prima facie endorsement* of the premise. A premise asserting that positive states of affairs that begin to obtain *could* have external causes would be deeply suspect if such causal scenarios were inconceivable or

conceptually incoherent. The fact that they are not—that they are, in fact, straightforwardly imaginable—counts decisively in their favor.

Indeed, it would be far more surprising if the premise were *inconceivable*. If we were asked to accept that certain positive beginnings are such that it is *metaphysically impossible* for anything external to them to cause their occurrence, we would reasonably demand a powerful and explicit argument to that effect. Absent such an argument, the default modal position is permissive rather than restrictive: unless a contradiction can be shown, metaphysical possibility remains open.

Thus, while conceivability does not prove the premise, it *supports* it in precisely the way one would expect for a well-formed, non-ad hoc metaphysical principle. It confirms that the premise is not only consistent, but natural, intelligible, and aligned with our most basic modal and explanatory intuitions. In that sense, the a priori intuitive support for the claim that positive states of affairs that begin to obtain *can possibly have external causes* is exactly what we should expect if the premise is true.

3) *Conceptual Coherence* - Upon careful analysis, there appears to be no conceptual incoherence, contradiction, or category mistake involved in positing—even at the level of *mere metaphysical possibility*—that a positive state of affairs which begins to obtain could have something external to it that causes its obtaining. The concept of a *positive beginning* does not, by its nature, encode causal self-sufficiency, nor does it conceptually preclude the involvement of prior or concurrent explanatory factors. As such, the notion of an external cause stands in no tension with the content of the concept itself.

Crucially, this point remains intact even if, *in the actual world*, a given positive state of affairs that begins has no cause whatsoever. Actual uncausedness does not entail *necessary* uncausedness. To infer otherwise would be to illicitly conflate what is true *de re* in one world with what must be true *de re* in all worlds. The modal space remains open unless a contradiction can be shown between the concept of the

state of affairs and the concept of having an external cause. No such contradiction is forthcoming.

Indeed, for many familiar states of affairs—such as the spontaneous decay of a particle, the appearance of a virtual fluctuation, or even the origination of a universe—it is perfectly intelligible to imagine a possible world in which structurally similar states of affairs are brought about by external causal conditions, even if our best theories suggest that in the actual world they are not. The claim under consideration requires only that *some* possible world contains an external cause of such a state of affairs, not that this be true in the actual world.

This reveals the modesty and strength of the premise. It does not assert a necessary causal principle, nor does it deny the coherence of brute beginnings. It asserts only modal permissibility: that nothing about the nature of a positive state of affairs that begins renders an external cause metaphysically impossible. To deny this would require demonstrating that the very *concept* of such a beginning entails causal isolation across all possible worlds—a much stronger and highly counterintuitive thesis.

Absent such a demonstration, the default position in modal metaphysics is permissive rather than restrictive. Where no contradiction, incoherence, or essential incompatibility is present, metaphysical possibility is preserved. Since the hypothesis of an external cause introduces no conceptual tension and violates no definitional constraints, it remains squarely within the space of the metaphysically possible.

Accordingly, the premise that for any positive state of affairs that can begin to obtain, it is at least metaphysically possible for there to be something external to it that causes its obtaining is not only intuitively plausible, but conceptually coherent in the strongest sense. The burden therefore lies not with the defender of the premise to justify its possibility, but with its critic to explain why such causal scenarios should be ruled out *a priori* across all possible worlds.

4) *Compatibility* - Unlike stronger causal principles, the present premise is deliberately *weak* and correspondingly *robust*. It is fully compatible with the metaphysical possibility—and even the actuality—of brute facts, uncaused contingent beginnings, ungrounded infinite causal regresses, purely internal contingent explanations, and even circular or non-linear causal structures. It neither presupposes nor entails that everything which begins to obtain *must* have a cause. Rather, it asserts only that for any positive state of affairs that can begin to obtain, it is *metaphysically possible* for there to be something external to it that causes its obtaining. Precisely because of its modal modesty, the principle survives objections that are fatal to stronger causal axioms.

This point is especially important in light of appeals to quantum mechanics. Some critics contend that certain quantum events—such as radioactive decay or virtual particle fluctuations—are genuinely uncaused. For present purposes, that concession is entirely harmless. Even if some quantum events are in fact uncaused in the actual world, this does nothing to undermine the premise at issue. To defeat the premise, the detractor would have to establish something far stronger: namely, that such events are not merely *actually* uncaused, but *absolutely uncausable*—that is, that in no possible world could anything external bring about their positive beginning. That is a sweeping modal claim, and it carries a correspondingly heavy burden of proof.

Importantly, the distinction between *uncaused* and *uncausable* cannot be elided. Showing that an event lacks a cause in the actual world does not even begin to show that it could not have had a cause under different conditions, laws, or structures. To move from the former to the latter requires a principled argument that the very nature of the event excludes causal explanation across all possible worlds. No such argument has been forthcoming in the philosophy of physics or metaphysics.

Indeed, many philosophers and physicists deny that quantum events are causeless in the first place.[36] Virtual particles, for example, are often said to emerge from the quantum vacuum—a structured physical state governed by laws, fields, and fluctuating energy, and emphatically not "nothing." On such views, quantum events are not brute eruptions, but the lawful outcomes of underlying physical conditions. Whether or not this interpretation is ultimately correct is beside the point. Even if it were false—even if virtual particles and similar phenomena were truly uncaused in the actual world—it would still remain perfectly coherent that such events could have causes in other possible worlds.

We can easily conceive of metaphysically possible worlds in which analogous quantum events are triggered by additional fields, background structures, devices, or altered physical laws. One might imagine a world in which a specialized machine, a novel fundamental interaction, or a modified quantum law governs particle emergence. None of these scenarios involves contradiction, conceptual confusion, or metaphysical absurdity. On the contrary, they are intelligible extensions of familiar explanatory frameworks. The space of such possibilities is vast, and nothing about the concept of a positive quantum beginning forecloses them *a priori*.

Thus, the compatibility of the premise with quantum indeterminacy and brute facts is not a liability, but a virtue. It allows us to acknowledge the genuine interpretive openness of contemporary physics without surrendering a minimal and eminently reasonable modal claim. The premise does not insist that quantum events *must* be caused; it insists only that it is *possible* for them to be caused in at least some possible world. Absent a compelling demonstration that such causal scenarios are metaphysically impossible in principle, the premise remains intact.

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[36]There are at least ten different interpretations of quantum mechanics, many of which are fully deterministic, and no one knows which, if any of these, is correct. Even so determined a naturalist as the physicist Victor Stenger admits, "Other viable interpretations of quantum mechanics remain with no consensus on which, if any, is the correct one"; hence, we have to remain "open to the possibility that causes may someday be found for such phenomena." Victor Stenger, *Has Silence Found God?* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus, 2003), 188–89, 173.

In short, the weak causal principle under consideration is resilient precisely because it is modest. It accommodates the full range of causal irregularities that critics typically invoke, while placing the dialectical burden where it belongs: on those who would deny not merely actual causation, but causal *possibility* itself. And that is a burden that has yet to be met.

5) *Modal Continuity* - States of affairs that begin to obtain do not appear to differ in any way that is *relevant* to their being causable. Suppose, for example, that it is compatible with the Basic Laws of Reality—that is, with the metaphysically necessary truths—that a particular apple tree which begins has a cause. If so, why would it not also be compatible with those same Basic Laws that a particular *orange* tree which begins has a cause? Differences in shape, size, or the type of fruit a tree bears seem wholly irrelevant to whether it is possible for the tree to have a cause. This thought naturally generalizes: variations in complexity, degree of organization, or spatial arrangement do not appear to affect causability at all for positive *beginnings*. Likewise, if it is possible for an individual orange tree to have a cause, then it should also be possible for a *grove* of orange trees (which begins) to have a cause, and indeed for a grove of trees of any kind to have a cause. By the same reasoning, if it is possible for a solar system that begins to exist to have a cause, then it is likewise possible for an entire galaxy that begins to exist to have a cause.

Additionally, if it is possible for a galaxy to have a cause, then it does not seem *a priori* absolutely impossible that still larger or more complex structures (that begin) could likewise have causes. The modal space does not abruptly close once we move from a galaxy to a galaxy cluster, from clusters to superclusters, from superclusters to filaments, or even to a universe or multiverse-sized system whose existence could begin—whether its cause is understood as causally (though not necessarily temporally) prior. Nothing in our grasp of the Basic Laws suggests that the possibility of a cause evaporates once we scale up the system under consideration. Indeed, our best physical theories describe a hierarchy of structures—stars, galaxies, clusters, filaments—formed through processes that themselves appear amenable to causal

explanation. The continuity in our causal theorizing across these scales offers at least some defeasible evidence that modal constraints are not sensitive to mere increases in magnitude or complexity.

One might object that it is mistaken to speak of "explanations" or "causes" at the most fundamental metaphysical level. Explanations, it may be argued, are ways in which human agents describe or conceptualize the universe in order to make sense of it, rather than features of the mind-independent structure of reality itself. On this view, it would be illegitimate to move from explanatory talk in ordinary contexts to the claim that there is a metaphysical explanation—or causal account—of the deepest layers of contingent reality.

Two distinct concerns can be distinguished here. The first is the worry that explanations are not objective. However, even if explanations are in some sense mind-dependent, explanation-based reasoning can still reliably track objective features of the world. For example, the theory of common ancestry explains a wide range of biological phenomena, and this explanatory success gives us good reason to believe the theory is true. More generally, Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE) is widely regarded as a reliable guide to external reality, regardless of whether explanations themselves are construed as mental constructs.

A second, and perhaps more serious, concern is that explanation-based reasoning may be unreliable when applied far beyond the domain of ordinary human experience. While this caution is understandable, scientists routinely employ IBE in precisely such remote contexts—for example, when evaluating hypotheses about subatomic particles, dark matter, or even multiverses. If IBE were unreliable in these cases, we would have no reason to prefer the best explanation to no explanation at all. Yet we do, in fact, take ourselves to have reason to prefer the best explanation even in these highly theoretical domains.

It is also important to emphasize that the weak causal principle itself represents a relatively simple hypothesis. It can be expressed using only a small set of conceptually basic notions—such as 'cause,' 'positive state of affairs,' 'begin,' and related logical terms. One may suspect that no simpler principle can account for the broad range of apparent cases of causation or explanation, setting aside principles that merely entail

the weak causal principle. Moreover, the principle does not appear ad hoc or implausible a priori. Given its simplicity, modesty, explanatory scope, and apparent adequacy, one has at least some reason to think that the weak causal principle is true.

What matters, from a modal standpoint, is simply whether the entity in question is the kind of thing that *can* begin to exist. If that condition is satisfied, then it is difficult to see why the possibility of a cause would apply to galaxies but not to larger cosmic structures. Even cosmologists routinely treat events at the scale of galaxy clusters and filaments as the products of earlier physical conditions, governed by laws that allow for causal antecedents. And many physical models of the early universe—quantum-cosmological, inflationary, or otherwise—already posit causal dependence relations that are not temporal in the classical sense. In light of this, the idea that a universe-level beginning could be causally possible is not only coherent but finds a kind of indirect support in scientific practice: we regularly apply causal principles far beyond the scale of ordinary objects, all the way up to structures of staggering vastness.

Thus, once one grants the *possibility* of causes for smaller cosmological systems, it becomes difficult—absent some principled modal boundary—to deny even the bare *possibility* of causes for larger ones. The modal landscape seems uniform across these scales, and this uniformity strengthens the case that even a universe with a beginning could, in principle, have a cause.

The size, shape, or level of generality of the system makes no apparent difference to the possibility of its being caused. There is a kind of **modal continuity** here: the possibility of a cause is unaffected by the differences that characterize whatever particular contingent entity happens to begin to exist. The central idea is that compatibility with the Basic Laws is insensitive to variations in complexity or arrangement among contingent things. Indeed, we may take this intuition of modal continuity regarding possible causes to be considerably stronger than any intuition that there is continuity with respect to *actual* causes.

It is important to emphasize that this line of reasoning is *not* a "part-to-whole" inference of the sort that commits a fallacy (e.g., reasoning that

because each part has a feature, the whole must have it too). Rather, the reasoning here rests on a **modal uniformity insight**: the Basic Laws of Reality do not discriminate among contingent entities on the basis of size, complexity, or composition when it comes to the mere *possibility* of being caused. The shift from a tree to a grove, or from a solar system to a galaxy, does not require aggregating causal properties from parts to a whole; it simply reflects the fact that the modal profile governing causability is uniform across such variations.

It is also important to stress that the possibility of a cause does not depend on what materials actually exist. Even if, as a matter of fact, there have never been materials capable of causing a given system to begin to exist, it may still be possible that such materials *could* exist—so long as the system itself is possibly such that it could begin to exist. This is, once again, underscored by the historical development of our ontology: as science has progressed, we have repeatedly discovered causes radically different from anything our ancestors conceived, and we have sought causes for events they could never have envisioned. Consider astrophysicists, for instance, investigating the cause of the accelerating expansion of the universe itself. Despite the dramatic shifts in the kinds of entities and events under study, the plausibility that there *is*—and a fortiori, *could be*—a cause has remained intact.

Thus, one can have reasons to accept this weaker causal principle that extend beyond the reasons one might have for accepting the stronger explanatory principle.

Finally, an analogy may help to bring the abstract modal claim into sharper focus. Suppose that one day you return home and discover a toy robot sitting on your desk—a robot that was not there when you left. You are immediately confronted with a *positive state of affairs that has begun to obtain*: the presence of the robot. Now, whatever one ultimately thinks about how such an object came to be there, it is surely *at least metaphysically possible* that there is some external cause of its appearance in some possible world. Perhaps another person placed it there; perhaps it was moved by a chain of physical events; perhaps

some unusual but lawful process brought it about. These causal scenarios are all straightforwardly intelligible.

Of course, one could insist that the robot's appearance is a brute anomaly—that it simply popped into existence uncaused from literally nothing. Even granting that possibility for the sake of argument, nothing about it undermines the relevant modal claim. For even if the robot were in fact uncaused in the actual world, it would remain perfectly coherent that, in at least one possible world, its appearance was brought about by something external to it. Actual uncausedness does not entail necessary uncausedness, and denying that distinction would require a substantial and highly nontrivial argument.

The force of the analogy lies in this point: to reject the premise under discussion, one would have to do far more than suggest that some events are unlikely to have causes, or even that some events actually lack causes. One would have to show that there exists at least one positive state of affairs that begins to obtain such that it is *metaphysically impossible*—in every possible world—for anything external to it to cause its obtaining. That is an exceptionally strong modal claim. It asserts not merely the absence of causation here and now, but the impossibility of causation *in principle* across all of modal space.

Absent a clear demonstration of such impossibility—one grounded in contradiction, conceptual incoherence, or essential incompatibility—the denial of the premise is unwarranted. The default modal posture, especially in cases involving positive beginnings, is permissive rather than prohibitive. If coherent causal scenarios are readily available, and no contradiction is shown, metaphysical possibility remains open.

Accordingly, the toy robot case functions not as a proof, but as a clarifying lens. It makes vivid how modest the premise really is, and how demanding its rejection would have to be. In the absence of a compelling argument establishing the existence of a positive beginning that is absolutely uncausable in every possible world, it seems more reasonable to affirm that Premise 1 is at least more plausibly true than false.

Premise 2: "It is at least possible for there to be a beginning of the positive state of affairs of its being the case that there exist contingent concrete things."

Two central reasons may be offered in support of this premise:

1) ***Conceptual point***
First, by definition, a contingent entity or arrangement is one that exists in some possible worlds but not in others. Its existence is metaphysically possible, but so too is its non-existence. This means that both states—being and not being—are live options. Consequently, there is no contradiction or violation of essential nature (as we shall later see) in conceiving of a scenario in which a contingent entity does not exist prior to a certain time t_1 (since non-existence is always on the table for contingent beings), and yet does exist at time t_1 (since its existence is likewise possible). To imagine all contingent things beginning together at some moment is therefore perfectly coherent: their joint non-existence beforehand and their joint existence thereafter both fall squarely within the realm of possibility.[37]

Second, contingent things—the sorts of things that can fail to exist—show no natural inclination toward eternal endurance. Everything we know from both philosophy and physics points in the opposite direction. Stars exhaust their nuclear fuel and collapse into white

[37] Notice that the formulation of Premise (2)—namely, "It is at least possible for there to be a beginning of the positive state of affairs of its being the case that there exist contingent concrete things"—is intentionally neutral with respect to different mereological theories. On one view, all contingent concrete things together compose a single contingent Whole or totality. If so, the premise can be understood as saying that this contingent Whole itself could have begun to exist. On another view, there is no genuine overarching totality composed of all contingent things. Reality may instead consist only of many discrete contingent entities, without any further object "over and above" them. In that case, the premise need not imply that some single cosmic Whole could begin to exist; rather, it requires only that there could be an initial obtaining of contingent concrete reality—namely, a first state in which contingent entities exist at all. Thus, the premise does not depend on whether one accepts unrestricted composition, mereological nihilism, or any other specific account of wholes and parts. It is formulated broadly enough to accommodate both the idea of a single contingent totality and the idea of merely many contingent things existing discretely.

dwarfs, neutron stars, or black holes; radioactive isotopes decay; galaxies lose angular momentum; planets cool; and even black holes evaporate through Hawking radiation. The universe itself is governed by the second law of thermodynamics, which guarantees a universal slide toward increasing disorder. As physicist Paul Davies explains:

"Today, few cosmologists doubt that the universe, at least as we know it, did have an origin at a finite moment in the past. The alternative—that the universe has always existed in one form or another—runs into a rather basic paradox. The sun and stars cannot keep burning forever: sooner or later they will run out of fuel and die. The same is true of all irreversible physical processes; the stock of energy available in the universe to drive them is finite, and cannot last for eternity. This is an example of the so-called second law of thermodynamics, which, applied to the entire cosmos, predicts that it is stuck on a one-way slide of degeneration and decay towards a final state of maximum entropy, or disorder. As this final state has not yet been reached, it follows that the universe cannot have existed for an infinite time."[38]

Davies concludes, quite starkly: "The universe can't have existed forever. We know there must have been an *absolute* beginning a finite time ago."[39]

Today, most physicists hold that the matter and energy of the universe were simply present as a *starting condition*, after which the universe has evolved in accordance with the trajectory dictated by the second law of thermodynamics ever since its beginning a finite time ago.

Of course, various attempts have been made to avoid the implication—predicted on the basis of the second law—that the universe had a beginning. Yet none of these attempts has proven successful. Some

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[38] Paul Davies, "The Big Bang—and Before," The Thomas Aquinas College Lecture Series, Thomas Aquinas College, Santa Paula, Calif., March 2002.
[39] Paul Davies, "The Big Questions: In the Beginning," ABC Science Online, interview with Phillip Adams, http://aca.mq.edu.au/pdavieshtml.

skeptics maintain hope that a future theory of quantum gravity might ultimately avert the implications of the second law of thermodynamics. However, in 2013, the cosmologist Aron Wall of the University of California formulated a new singularity theorem that appears to close the door on that possibility. Wall demonstrates that, given the validity of the generalized second law of thermodynamics within quantum gravity, the universe must have begun to exist—unless one postulates a *reversal of the arrow of time* (that is, time running backward!) at some point in the past. But, as Wall observes, such a scenario would itself involve a thermodynamic beginning in time which "would seem to raise the same sorts of philosophical questions that any other sort of beginning in time would."[40] Wall further reports that his results require the validity of only certain basic concepts, so that "it is reasonable to believe that the results will hold in a complete theory of quantum gravity."[41]

These scientific insights align naturally with philosophical reflection. If contingent reality had existed for an infinite past without any necessary foundation sustaining it, then it has already had infinitely many opportunities for something essential to fail. Whenever a thing *can* fail, the likelihood that it eventually *will* fail rises as time stretches on. The positive tendency of things to persist may hold at a local or temporary level. Yet, on a broader scale, all human and scientific experience suggests that anything genuinely capable of failure or cessation—as contingent things are—will eventually fail or cease to exist.

Over an infinite span, these probabilities accumulate to the point where uninterrupted survival becomes virtually impossible. And without a necessary being or principle to ground the continued existence of contingent things, there is nothing that prevents reality from dissolving at any moment—nothing that rules out the possibility that the entire contingent world could disappear like vapor at 7:05 this evening. The fact that it has not done so is remarkable. Even over a millennium, the probability that the fundamental contingent structures underpinning the world simply cease to exist is non-zero; over eons, it grows. So, if

[40] Aron C. Wall, "The Generalized Second Law Implies a Quantum Singularity Theorem," arXiv:1010.5513v3 [gr-qc] 24 (January 2013): 38.
[41] Wall, "Generalized Second Law," 4.

contingent reality had been running indefinitely with no necessary foundation, it is overwhelmingly likely that it would have collapsed long ago and, once gone, would not have spontaneously reconstituted itself from nothing.

This leads to a modest but powerful conclusion. The argument is not that an absolute beginning of contingent reality *actually happened*. Instead, the claim is that such a beginning is *at least* metaphysically possible, and in fact more reasonable than the notion of an infinitely old contingent reality that has somehow endured forever against all thermodynamic and probabilistic expectations. A beginning coheres with what we observe about fragile, finite, entropy-bound things; an endless past of flawless contingent survival does not. Thus, even without asserting that a beginning occurred, we have strong grounds to affirm that a beginning of contingent reality is genuinely *possible*—and quite plausibly more probable than its denial.

2) *Empirical-theoretical point*

The physical evidence for the expansion of the universe comes from one of the most dynamic and rapidly advancing areas of modern science: astronomy and astrophysics. Prior to the 1920s, the prevailing assumption among scientists was that the universe was eternal and unchanging. The first serious challenge to this traditional picture emerged in 1917, when Albert Einstein applied his newly formulated General Theory of Relativity (GR) to the universe as a whole. To his dismay, Einstein discovered that his equations did not permit a static, eternal universe. In order to preserve such a model, he introduced an additional term—later known as the cosmological constant—to counteract the attractive force of gravity produced by matter.

Even with this modification, Einstein's model was precariously balanced. The slightest disturbance—such as the redistribution of matter from one region of the universe to another—would cause the universe either to collapse inward or to expand outward. Taking this instability seriously, the Russian mathematician Alexander Friedman and, independently, the Belgian astronomer Georges Lemaître derived solutions to Einstein's equations in the 1920s that described a universe in dynamic expansion.

The revolutionary significance of the Friedman–Lemaître model lay in its implication that the universe has a history. As one commentator has observed, up to that point the idea of an expanding universe "was absolutely beyond comprehension. Throughout all of human history the universe was regarded as fixed and immutable and the idea that it might actually be changing was inconceivable."[42] If the Friedman–Lemaître model is correct, the universe cannot be treated as a timeless, static entity. Instead, it is a dynamic system that evolves over time, making temporality a central feature of any serious cosmological investigation.

Empirical confirmation soon followed. In 1929, the American astronomer Edwin Hubble discovered that light from distant galaxies is systematically shifted toward the red end of the electromagnetic spectrum. This redshift was interpreted as a Doppler effect, indicating that these galaxies are receding from us along the line of sight. Remarkably, Hubble's observations provided direct empirical support for the expansion of the universe predicted by Friedman and Lemaître on theoretical grounds using Einstein's GR. This discovery marked a decisive turning point in the history of science. As John Wheeler famously remarked, "Of all the great predictions that science has ever made over the centuries, was there ever one greater than this, to predict, and predict correctly, and predict against all expectation a phenomenon so fantastic as the expansion of the universe?"[43]

According to the Friedman–Lemaître model, as time progresses the distances separating galaxies increase. It is crucial to understand that, as a theory grounded in GR, this expansion is not described as matter moving outward into a preexisting empty space. Rather, it is *space itself* that expands. Galaxies are approximately at rest relative to the fabric of space, yet they recede from one another as space stretches—much like dots drawn on the surface of a balloon move farther apart as the balloon is inflated.

As the universe expands, its overall density decreases. This leads to a striking implication: if the expansion is mathematically reversed and

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[42] Gregory L. Naber, Spacetime and Singularities: an Introduction (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 126–27.
[43] John A. Wheeler, "Beyond the Hole," in Some Strangeness in the Proportion, ed. Harry Woolf (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1980), 354.

extrapolated backward in time, the universe becomes increasingly dense. Continuing this extrapolation leads to a state of infinite density at a finite point in the past. This state corresponds to a cosmological singularity, where spacetime curvature, temperature, pressure, and density diverge to infinity. Such a singularity represents a boundary to spacetime itself. P. C. W. Davies comments:

"If we extrapolate this prediction to its extreme, we reach a point when all distances in the universe have shrunk to zero. An initial cosmological singularity therefore forms a past temporal extremity to the universe. We cannot continue physical reasoning, or even the concept of spacetime, through such an extremity. For this reason most cosmologists think of the initial singularity as the beginning of the universe. On this view the big bang represents the creation event; the creation not only of all the matter and energy in the universe, but also of spacetime itself."[44]

In addition to the scientific evidence for the expansion of the universe, modern cosmology provides multiple independent lines of empirical evidence that strongly support the conclusion that the universe *began* in an extremely hot, dense state a finite time ago. Among the most compelling are the cosmic microwave background radiation (CMB) and the primordial nucleosynthesis of the light elements. These phenomena are especially significant because they were not merely discovered after the fact and retroactively incorporated into cosmological theory; rather, they were predicted in advance by the Standard Big Bang model and subsequently confirmed through observation, thereby providing powerful corroboration of a universe that emerged from an early high-energy state. Their predictive success and mutual consistency make them among the most important empirical pillars of contemporary cosmology.

The cosmic microwave background radiation constitutes one of the most direct observational relics of the early universe. According to the

[44] P. C. W. Davies, "Spacetime Singularities in Cosmology," in The Study of Time III, ed. J. T. Fraser (Berlin: Springer Verlag, 1978), 78–79.

standard hot Big Bang model, the early universe existed as an opaque plasma composed of photons, electrons, and baryons. As cosmic expansion proceeded and temperatures fell, the universe eventually cooled sufficiently for electrons and protons to combine into neutral hydrogen atoms. At that point—roughly 380,000 years after the onset of cosmic expansion—photons were able to travel freely through space, leaving behind a relic radiation field that persists to this day. Due to the continued expansion of the universe, these photons have been stretched to microwave wavelengths and are now observed as a nearly isotropic radiation background with an almost perfect blackbody spectrum at a temperature of approximately 2.725 Kelvin. Precision measurements have confirmed this spectrum with extraordinary accuracy, precisely as predicted by Big Bang cosmology. Moreover, tiny temperature fluctuations in the CMB correspond to primordial density variations that later seeded galaxies and large-scale cosmic structure. Observations from missions such as COBE, WMAP, and Planck have measured these anisotropies with remarkable precision, providing detailed confirmation of theoretical predictions about the early universe.[45]

A second, independent line of evidence arises from Big Bang nucleosynthesis (BBN), the process by which the lightest elements formed during the first few *minutes* of cosmic history. When the universe was roughly one second old, temperatures were on the order of billions of degrees, allowing nuclear reactions to occur among protons and neutrons. During this brief epoch—lasting only a few minutes—these reactions produced light nuclei, primarily hydrogen and helium-4, along with small quantities of deuterium, helium-3, and lithium-7. Importantly, the theory of primordial nucleosynthesis yields precise quantitative predictions regarding the relative abundances of these elements based on well-understood nuclear physics and the density of baryonic matter in the early universe. Astronomical observations have since confirmed these predictions with striking agreement. In particular, measurements indicate that approximately 25

[45] C. L. Bennett et al., "Nine-Year Wilkinson Microwave Anisotropy Probe (WMAP) Observations: Final Maps and Results," *The Astrophysical Journal Supplement Series* 208, no. 2 (2013): 20.

percent of the baryonic mass of the universe consists of helium-4, with smaller but measurable amounts of deuterium and other light isotopes—precisely the pattern predicted by Big Bang nucleosynthesis models.[46]

What makes these lines of evidence especially compelling is their independence and convergence. The cosmic microwave background provides a snapshot of the universe approximately 380,000 years after the beginning of cosmic expansion, while primordial nucleosynthesis probes conditions that existed within the first few minutes. Despite probing vastly different epochs and relying on different physical processes—radiation decoupling in one case and nuclear reactions in the other—both phenomena point consistently to the same overarching cosmological narrative: a universe that *began* in an extremely hot, dense state and has since expanded and cooled over billions of years. Indeed, the precise cosmological parameters derived from CMB observations independently predict baryon densities that match those required for the observed light-element abundances, providing a striking cross-verification between two entirely different empirical datasets.[47]

Taken together, these discoveries form a powerful cumulative case for the reality of a cosmic beginning. The cosmic microwave background preserves the thermal afterglow of the early universe, while primordial nucleosynthesis records the nuclear processes that occurred within the first minutes of cosmic history. Because these two phenomena arise from distinct physical mechanisms yet converge upon a single coherent model of cosmic evolution, they constitute mutually reinforcing empirical confirmation that the universe once existed in a dramatically hotter and denser state than it does today. Continued observational refinement of both the CMB and primordial element abundances has only strengthened this conclusion, making them among the most

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[46] Gary Steigman, "Primordial Nucleosynthesis in the Precision Cosmology Era," *Annual Review of Nuclear and Particle Science* 57 (2007): 463–491.
[47] Planck Collaboration, "Planck 2018 Results. VI. Cosmological Parameters," *Astronomy & Astrophysics* 641 (2020): A6.

compelling scientific evidences for the early hot phase—and thus the finite temporal past—of the universe.[48]

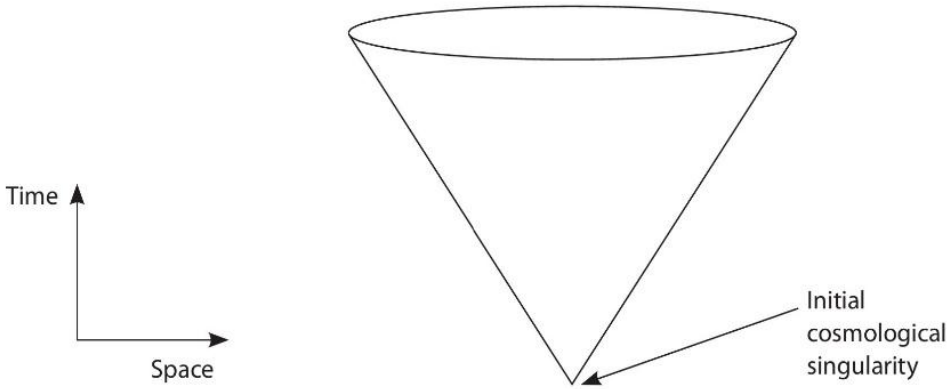
Therefore, it is now the case that many *actual, mainstream* scientific models posit or entail a universal beginning, and many cosmologists regard this as not only possible but probable. Since the universe is, by definition, all of matter, space, and time, its beginning would seem to constitute at least a plausible *possible* starting point for contingent concreta.[49] Consider, for example:

- **The Standard Big Bang Model (ΛCDM):** This widely accepted framework posits that the universe—space, time, matter, and energy—had a finite beginning about 13.8 billion years ago. The standard Big Bang model describes a universe which is not eternal in the past, but which came into being a finite time ago. Moreover—and this deserves underscoring—the origin it posits is an absolute origin out of nothing. For not only all matter and energy, but space and time themselves come into being at the initial cosmological singularity. As physicists John Barrow and Frank Tipler emphasize, "At this singularity, space and time came into existence; literally nothing existed before the singularity, so, if the Universe

[48] Steven Weinberg, *Cosmology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 19–36.

[49] This consideration becomes even more compelling upon further reflection. Anything that exists "outside" (i.e., without) the absolute spatiotemporal beginning of the universe—and thus lacks temporal duration, spatial extension, and material constitution—would most naturally be understood either as a necessarily existent abstract object or as the necessary being under consideration. While there are alternative metaphysical proposals, such as versions of Universal Wavefunction Monism on which contingent entities exist timelessly, whether prior to or independent of the universe's beginning, such views remain controversial, far from widely accepted, and by no means self-evident. As a result, they cannot be assumed as default explanations, and the possibility outlined here remains very much open. Moreover, even if it were granted that some contingent concreta in fact exist timelessly, their contingency entails that they do not exist in all possible worlds. It is therefore coherent to conceive of another possible world in which the beginning of the universe coincides with the beginning of all contingent concrete reality. Such a modal possibility *cannot* be ruled out, and that is all that the argument presented here requires. Indeed, this picture—according to which spacetime and all contingent physical entities have a finite past and originate together—is precisely what the majority of contemporary cosmologists take to be quite plausible, given our best current understanding of cosmology.

originated at such a singularity, we would truly have a creation *ex nihilo*."[50] On such a model the universe originates *ex nihilo* in the sense that at the initial singularity it is true *that there is no earlier spacetime point* or it is false that *something existed prior to the singularity*. Thus, we may graphically represent spacetime as a cone.



Conical representation of Standard Model spacetime.[51] Space and time begin at the initial cosmological singularity, before which literally nothing (that is, nothing *spatiotemporal* or *material*) exists.

[50] John Barrow and Frank Tipler, The Anthropic Cosmological Principle (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), 442.

[51] Nevertheless, the standard Big Bang model will likely require modification in several respects. The model is formulated within the framework of Einstein's General Theory of Relativity, but that theory is expected to break down under the extreme conditions that prevailed at very small scales and very high energies near the beginning of the universe. In such regimes, quantum effects become significant, and a satisfactory account would require a quantum theory of gravity—a theory that successfully integrates general relativity with quantum mechanics. Although various approaches to quantum gravity have been proposed, there is as yet no widely accepted solution. In addition, the expansion of the universe is not perfectly uniform, as early versions of the standard model assumed. Observational evidence indicates that the expansion is currently accelerating, and cosmologists widely accept that the early universe underwent a brief period of extremely rapid expansion known as cosmic inflation. These refinements modify the details of the model but do not undermine its central implication that the universe has a finite past.

- **The Hartle–Hawking No-Boundary Proposal:** Though it modifies the nature of the beginning, this model still treats the universe as having a kind of finite origin, without a classical "before." Again, if even possible, it exemplifies that contingent reality as a whole could commence.[52] As Barrow

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Since the pioneering work of Alexander Friedmann and Georges Lemaître, physicists have proposed numerous alternative cosmological models. Some of these attempted to describe a universe without a temporal beginning, but many such models have encountered serious theoretical or empirical difficulties. By contrast, many of the most widely discussed contemporary models—including those that modify the earliest stages of cosmic history—still imply that the universe has a finite past. Even proposals that avoid a sharply defined initial singularity, such as Stephen Hawking's "no-boundary" model, do not describe a universe with an infinite past. Rather, they portray the universe as having a finite history that extends back to an early boundary or limit, even if that limit is not a conventional point-like beginning in time. In any case, metaphysical possibility remains clearly open.

[52] Perhaps it will be argued that this interpretation of quantum gravity models fails to take seriously the concept of "imaginary time." In certain formulations of Einstein's equations, the substitution of imaginary numbers for the time variable has the unusual effect of rendering the temporal dimension mathematically indistinguishable from spatial dimensions. Under such a transformation, the regime prior to the Planck time is no longer described by spacetime in the ordinary physical sense, but rather by a four-dimensional Euclidean geometry. Interpreted realistically, such a four-dimensional space would contain no genuine temporal becoming; it would exist timelessly and without succession. Stephen Hawking describes this state as "completely self-contained and not affected by anything outside itself. It would be neither created nor destroyed. It would just BE." The central interpretive question, however, is whether this "imaginary time" regime should be understood realistically or merely instrumentally. There are strong reasons to conclude that the use of imaginary time functions primarily as a mathematical device rather than as a literal ontological description. First, no clear physical interpretation of imaginary time has been successfully articulated. It is difficult to specify what it would mean, in concrete physical terms, to speak of the passage of an imaginary second or of an object persisting through two imaginary minutes. Second, time appears metaphysically distinct from space insofar as temporal moments are ordered by an "earlier than" relation that has no direct analogue among spatial coordinates. The formal substitution of imaginary time obscures this asymmetry rather than explaining it. Consequently, "imaginary time" is most plausibly understood as a mathematical contrivance employed to simplify calculations. As John D. Barrow notes, physicists have frequently used this "change time into space" procedure as a useful computational technique in ordinary quantum mechanics without supposing that time is literally equivalent to space. Once the relevant calculations are completed, one ordinarily transforms the equations back into the standard framework of one temporal and three spatial dimensions. In the Hartle–Hawking proposal, however, Hawking declines to perform this final reconversion. If one does return to real-valued time, the singularity re-emerges. Hawking himself acknowledges: "Only if we could picture the universe in terms of imaginary time would there be no singularities. . . . When one goes back to

points out, "This type of quantum universe has not always existed; it comes into being just as the classical cosmologies could … [such models are] often described as giving a picture of 'creation out of nothing.'"[53]

- **Vilenkin's Tunneling Model:** Proposes that the universe could have "tunneled" into existence from a quantum vacuum state. This highlights yet another theoretically coherent picture in which contingent existence begins. Time begins to exist just in case for any finite temporal interval, there are only a finite number of equal temporal intervals earlier than it. That condition is fulfilled for Quantum Gravity Models as well as for the Standard Model. According to Vilenkin, "The picture presented by quantum cosmology is that the universe starts as a small, closed 3-geometry and immediately enters the regime of eternal inflation, with new thermalized regions being constantly formed. In this picture, the universe has a beginning but no end."[54] Quantum Gravity models, like the Standard

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the real time in which we live, however, there will still appear to be singularities." On this interpretation, Hawking's model does not eliminate a cosmological beginning in a literal ontological sense, but rather reformulates a universe with a singular origin in mathematical terms that smooth out the singularity. The resulting description is therefore best understood as non-realist or instrumental in character. Alexander Vilenkin likewise treats imaginary time as a mere "computational convenience" without independent ontological significance. Notably, Hawking himself adopts a similar instrumentalist stance in other contexts. One especially clear example appears in *The Nature of Space and Time*, where he describes particle pair creation in terms of an electron tunneling through Euclidean space (where time is treated as imaginary) before emerging into ordinary Minkowski spacetime as an electron–positron pair accelerating away from one another. This account is structurally analogous to the Hartle–Hawking cosmological model. Yet few, if any, physicists would interpret particle pair creation literally as an electron transitioning out of a timelessly existing four-dimensional Euclidean realm into classical spacetime. Accordingly, these models are difficult to construe realistically as literal accounts of the origin of the spacetime universe from a timelessly existing four-dimensional space. Rather, they are better understood as mathematical frameworks for describing the universe's origin in a manner that avoids singularities within the formalism itself. On such accounts, however, the question of why the universe exists at all—or what, if anything, brought it into being—remains unresolved. See Barrow, *Theories of Everything*, 66–67; Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, 138–39; Vilenkin, *Many Worlds in One*, 182.

[53] John D. Barrow, Theories of Everything (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 67-68.

[54] Alexander Vilenkin, "Quantum Cosmology and Eternal Inflation," 11.

Model, imply the beginning of the universe (and thus, plausibly, a possible commencement of contingency).

Now such a conclusion is profoundly disturbing for anyone who ponders it. For the question cannot be suppressed: *why did the universe come into being?* There can be no natural, physical cause of the big bang event, since, in atheist philosopher Quentin Smith's words, "it belongs analytically to the concept of the cosmological singularity that it is not the effect of prior physical events. The definition of a singularity . . . entails that it is impossible to extend the spacetime manifold beyond the singularity. . . . This rules out the idea that the singularity is an effect of some prior natural process."[55] Sir Arthur Eddington, contemplating the beginning of the universe, opined that the expansion of the universe was so preposterous and incredible that "I feel almost an indignation that anyone should believe in it—except myself."[56] He finally felt forced to conclude, "The beginning seems to present insuperable difficulties unless we agree to look on it as frankly supernatural." The problem of the origin of the universe, in the words of one astrophysical team, thus "involves a certain metaphysical aspect which may be either appealing or revolting."[57]

Even more powerfully, these models need *not* be proven *true* or even *probable* in order to do the philosophical work here. What matters is that their coherence shows it is *at least* metaphysically possible for contingent reality to have a beginning. The claim that all such models are not merely false but *metaphysically impossible* would saddle an opponent with an enormous burden of proof, since it would require demonstrating that every well-developed, internally consistent, and empirically informed cosmological model of a universal beginning fails at the level of bare modal coherence. These are just *a few* of these models; there are multiple others which are also coherent. The burden

[55] Quentin Smith, "The Uncaused Beginning of the Universe," in *Theism, Atheism and Big Bang Cosmology*, by William Lane Craig and Quentin Smith (Oxford : Clarendon, 1993), 120.
[56] Arthur Eddington, The Expanding Universe (New York: Macmillan, 1933), 124.
[57] Hubert Reeves, Jean Audouze, William A. Fowler, and David N. Schramm, "On the Origin of Light Elements," Astrophysical Journal 179 (1973): 912.

of proof in showing that *all* cosmological models which posit a universal beginning are absolutely impossible is extremely immense.

A further powerful line of support comes from the **Borde–Guth–Vilenkin (BGV) theorem**, which demonstrates that any spacetime which has, on average, a positive rate of expansion cannot be extended indefinitely into the past. In other words, if the universe—or any larger multiverse—has been overall expanding, then classical spacetime is necessarily *geodesically incomplete* in the past. Thus, no eternally inflating or always-expanding cosmology can be past-eternal; there must be some kind of boundary or beginning to contingent physical reality. Now either there was something on the other side of that boundary or there was not. If not, then that boundary just is the beginning of the universe. If there was something on the other side, then it will be a region described by the yet-to-be-discovered theory of quantum gravity. In that case, Vilenkin says, *it* will be the beginning of the universe. Either way, the universe began to exist.

What makes this result especially striking is its breadth. Unlike many earlier cosmological arguments for a beginning, the BGV theorem is not bound to the machinery of Einstein's general relativity, to restrictive energy conditions, or to assumptions about particular forms of matter or radiation. It is a geometric, kinematical result, applying across an enormous range of models—including those once designed specifically to avoid a temporal origin. This robustness lends scientific weight to the idea that contingent concreta, in their entirety, may well have had a first moment. Alexander Vilenkin goes so far as to say, "*All* the evidence we have says that the universe had a beginning."[58] Nor can one retreat into speculative multiverse scenarios or the yet-unsettled terrain of quantum gravity. The Borde–Guth–Vilenkin theorem was deliberately engineered to transcend those uncertainties; its conclusion follows as long as the universe—whether one or many, classical or quantum—exhibits a positive average expansion. In this respect, the theorem is immune to the very speculations often invoked to undermine the metaphysical implications of a universal beginning. Vilenkin pulls no punches; he says, "It is said that an argument is what convinces

[58] A.Vilenkin, cited in "Why physicists can't avoid a creation event," by Lisa Grossman, *New Scientist* (January 11, 2012).

reasonable men and a proof is what it takes to convince even unreasonable men. With the *proof* now in place, cosmologists can no longer hide behind the possibility of a past-eternal universe. There is no escape: they have to face the problem of a cosmic beginning."[59]

For the present philosophical purpose, however, the point is even stronger: we do not require proof that the BGV theorem is infallible, or that it yields the final word in cosmology. All that is needed is that it be *metaphysically possible* that its conclusion is true—that contingent concreta had a beginning.[60] The theorem powerfully underwrites this possibility by showing that a vast class of scientifically serious models predict exactly such a beginning. Even if such prominent scientists as Arvind Borde, Alan Guth, and Alexander Vilenkin are all terribly mistaken about the actual world, nevertheless their intelligent proposal seems at least *possible.* Thus, even if future physics were to revise or even overturn the BGV result, its existence already secures the modal point: the beginning of all contingent concreta is not only conceptually coherent but scientifically well-motivated. Unless one can demonstrate

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[59] Alexander Vilenkin, *Many Worlds in One: The Search for Other Universes* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 176.

[60] Although the Borde–Guth–Vilenkin (BGV) theorem shows that any universe which has, on average, been in a state of cosmic expansion must be past-geodesically incomplete, some physicists—notably Sean Carroll—have proposed speculative past-eternal models (often involving de Sitter–like cosmologies or time-symmetric scenarios) that attempt to evade the theorem's key condition. However, such proposals do not undermine the metaphysical possibility that the BGV theorem is correct in its domain. At most, they offer an alternative physical possibility, not a necessary one. Even if Carroll's model (or something like it) were true of our universe, it would not follow that all possible worlds must satisfy those conditions. The BGV theorem remains a mathematically rigorous and internally coherent result that is consistent with a wide range of empirical data, and thus clearly describes at least one class of physically and metaphysically possible universes. Consequently, the existence of speculative past-eternal models does not close off the modal space in which the theorem's conclusion—that such universes cannot be past-eternal—holds. If Sean Carroll believes that a past-eternal universe is metaphysically necessary, such that a beginning is impossible all the way down, then he is committed to a very strong philosophical thesis that goes beyond—and arguably stands in tension with—the more cautious, model-dependent stance of most cosmologists. If he does hold this view, one may reasonably ask why such a universe—one that cannot come into being or pass out of being—exists at all. The most straightforward answer would be that the universe exists of metaphysical necessity. But if that is correct, then the central conclusion of the MAB is already in place: there exists a necessary concrete being, and the argument can proceed to Stage II. Carroll, Sean M. *"In What Sense Is the Early Universe Fine-Tuned?"* (2014).

that the very idea of a beginning to contingent reality is metaphysically impossible, *and* that every cosmological model which posits such a beginning—together with the BGV theorem—is incoherent at the most basic level, Premise (2) remains secure.

Evaluating Premises (1) and (2)

In Chapter 1 we set out two central criteria for a proposition's being metaphysically possible. For a proposition to count as metaphysically possible, it must (1) exhibit strict logical coherence (i.e., be free of contradiction), and (2) not contradict the essential natures or necessary properties of the entities it concerns. We can now apply these criteria directly to Premises (1) and (2) of the Modal Argument from Beginnings (MAB). If the criteria are sound—and most philosophers would agree they are—then, regardless of whether we have independent positive evidence for the premises, both can be shown to be metaphysically possible. With S5 in play, that is enough to render the argument sound. The question, then, is whether the premises clear this bar.

Premise (1) states:

"For any positive state of affairs S that can begin to obtain, it is at least metaphysically possible for there to be something external to S that causes S to obtain."

This contains no strict logical contradiction. It is not like "a square circle" or "a married bachelor." So Criterion (1) is satisfied.

What about Criterion (2)? Does the essential nature of a "positive state of affairs that begins to obtain" preclude the possibility of an external cause? Clearly not. There is nothing in the concept of a "beginning" that rules out causability. In fact, it seems the opposite: we regularly observe positive beginnings that are caused. A candle flame being lit, a seed sprouting into a plant, a room becoming illuminated, a melody played on a piano, or the birth of a child are all examples of positive states of affairs that begin to obtain and do so precisely because of external causes.

If the very nature of being a positive beginning excluded external causation, then such instances would be metaphysically impossible. Yet they are obviously real.[61] Thus, both criteria are met, and Premise (1) counts as at least metaphysically possible.

Premise (2) states:

"It is at least possible for there to be a beginning of the positive state of affairs of its being the case that there exist contingent concrete things."

Again, no strict logical contradiction appears here. This is not like asserting a "four-sided triangle" or "I am both taller and shorter than myself." Criterion (1) is satisfied.

What about Criterion (2)? Does the essential nature of a "contingent concrete thing" exclude its having a possible beginning? Again, no. By definition, a contingent entity is one that can fail to exist. Therefore, it is perfectly coherent to envision at least one possible world in which a contingent concrete thing (or an entire collection of them) has a beginning.

And here, too, our everyday experience reinforces the point. A tree sprouting from a seed, a smartphone coming off an assembly line, a child being born, a house being built, or a star forming in a nebula—all are contingent concrete things with a beginning.[62] Surely these

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[61] Throughout we assume at least **T** (□P → P), standard for metaphysical modality. By duality (◇ ≡ ¬□¬), **T** yields the principle **P → ◇P** ("If P is actual, then P is possible"). Hence the observed instances cited above license the modal claim that such states of affairs are metaphysically possible.

[62] Someone might object that the cases we observe of contingent "beginnings" are not genuine beginnings at all, but merely rearrangements of pre-existing matter into new forms. As an objection to arguments such as the William Lane Craig–style Kalam Cosmological Argument, this concern is understandable. The present modal formulation, however, does not depend on the idea of things coming into existence absolutely. Instead, it concerns positive states of affairs that can begin to obtain. A state of affairs may begin to obtain even when the underlying materials already exist—for example, when matter first comes to be arranged in a particular configuration or when a new causal process begins. Thus the premise applies equally well to cases involving material rearrangement as well as to cases involving efficient causation more generally. What matters for the argument is simply that some contingent states of affairs can begin to obtain, not that new substances must come into existence *ex nihilo*. For those who prefer a more concrete formulation, the beginning of contingency may be understood as the first instantiation of a

observed instances are not metaphysically impossible. Thus, both criteria are again satisfied.

Perhaps someone might claim that, for all we know, maybe a Beginning of Contingency isn't *really* possible. After all, it may seem, matter cannot be created or destroyed. But even this does not undermine the case; if anything, such an assumption pushes us toward the conclusion of the argument. Consider first the idea that something cannot come into being or cease to exist. The most straightforward explanation of such permanence is that the entity in question cannot fail to exist—that is, it exists necessarily. If this is correct, then if matter truly cannot come into being or cease to be, the best explanation would be that matter exists metaphysically necessarily. But in that case we would already have reached the conclusion of the argument: namely, that there exists a necessary concrete reality.

Second, suppose instead that there cannot be a Beginning of Contingency—that is, suppose Premise (2), which affirms the possibility of such a beginning, is false. Even then the argument need not fail, because another explanatory path becomes available. If the state of affairs involving contingent reality cannot begin to be instantiated, we may reasonably ask *why* this is so. One natural answer is that reality cannot have an ultimate beginning because it is grounded in fundamental building blocks that exist necessarily. On this view, contingent things continually arise from more basic realities that themselves cannot fail to exist. If that were the case, then although Premise (2) would be false, the existence of necessary concrete reality would follow directly from the explanation of why contingency cannot have an absolute beginning. In that event, the argument would still reach the same conclusion, and we could simply proceed to the next stage of the analysis. But in practice few philosophers adopt such a strong thesis.

We can now see that, given our best evidence, both Premises (1) and (2) cleanly meet the bar for metaphysical possibility. That is precisely what MAB requires: not that the premises be demonstrably *actual*, but

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contingent arrangement of matter or concrete reality—perhaps coinciding with the earliest physical state of the universe and the commencement of time itself.

that they be demonstrably *possible*. Moreover, their possibility is vividly illustrated by directly observed instances, even if those are "smaller-scale" cases compared to the global premises of the argument. The fact that they occur in our experience *at all* shows that their *essential natures* do *not* exclude causability or beginnings.

Importantly, the mere fact of being the *first* contingent beginning introduces no new barrier. A first contingent beginning is no more metaphysically "uncausable" than a first contingent book is uncausable. Nothing in the essence of contingency changes merely because the case happens to possibly be "first."

The only way to resist this conclusion would be to assume *a priori* either **(a)** that no necessary thing could ever be a cause, or **(b)** that metaphysically necessary beings are impossible altogether. But both moves are question-begging: they assume precisely what they need to prove, namely that no necessary concrete thing exists. Unless someone can offer a non-circular reason to adopt such sweeping impossibility claims—or show that the two criteria themselves are defective—the analysis holds. On the criteria established, the premises are metaphysically possible, and with S5, MAB is confirmed as sound.

Premise 3: "If (1) and (2) are true, then it is possible that there is a necessary concrete thing."

Here, "concrete" simply means anything capable of causation. Notice that this premise isn't saying that the causal explanation of our actual universe *must* be a necessary being. There's room for brute fact, internal contingent explanation, or even a circular causal chain. It's just that, if you already accept both premises, a necessary concrete thing is a coherent modal possibility. Given S5, the rest of the argument follows logically. Here is the reasoning underlying this premise:

According to (2), it is possible for there to be a *beginning* to the obtaining of the positive state of affairs in which *contingent concrete things exist at all.* Premise (1), on the other hand, states that every

positive state of affairs **s** that can begin to obtain can (at least possibly) have an external cause.

From (1), we may therefore infer that it is possible for *the positive state of affairs of there being contingent concrete things* (as opposed to none) to have an external cause.

Let us restate this conclusion using our definition of "external." It is possible that there exists some entity **E** such that:

1. **(i) E** causes the state of affairs in which *contingent concrete things exist* to obtain; and

2. **(ii)** it is **not** the case that, if the existence of contingent concrete things were to fail to obtain, then **E** would fail to exist. In other words, **E** could exist even if no contingent concrete beings existed.

From condition **(ii)**, it follows that **E** is *not contingent*, for if there were no contingent beings, no contingent entity could exist. From condition **(i)**, it follows that **E** must be *concrete*, since, by our use of terms, only concrete entities can serve as causes.

Therefore, **E** would be a *necessary concrete being.*

It follows, then, that if premises (1) and (2) are true, it is possible that a necessary concrete being exists. The final step of the argument invokes the familiar *S5 modal inference*: from the metaphysical *possibility* of a necessary being, it follows that such a being is *actual.*

This inference—defended earlier in Chapter 1—rests on well-established and widely accepted principles of modal logic.

Independent Bridge I

One of the essential attributes that can be established in Stage II is the agency of the necessary entity, i.e., its volitional capacity to act freely. To establish this characteristic, Rasmussen (2009) argues that the causal connection between contingent substances and the necessary entity (let's call it "N") suggests the presence of a non-deterministic volitional act that would establish the personality of the necessary being. To establish this attribute, Rasmussen makes use of the following principle of causality:

(C1) For any set of contingent intrinsic properties or relations C, it is at least metaphysically possible that C be causally explained.[63]

This principle (similar to those sometimes proposed in Stage I) states that for every contingent property or contingent relation present in a concrete object/substance, it is possible that this exemplification can be causally explained.

The motivation behind C1 is highly intuitive and justified, and to illustrate it, we will use the following scenario: suppose there are two spherical objects, one red and the other blue. Both objects exist contingently and exemplify their colors contingently, meaning that neither their existence nor their colors are necessary, as they could have not existed or exemplified a different color. Naturally, the following question arises: why do these objects exist, and why do they have the colors they have? An explanation in causal terms for the contingent existence, properties, and relations of both objects should be metaphysically possible. Or for another example, imagine a wall (contingent or not) that has the contingent property of being blue, meaning it could have lacked that specific property. It seems at least

[63] Note the use of the modal operator of possibility (◊) when it is asserted that "C be causally explained," making C1 exceptionally modest. Also, C1 presents a slight modification that simplifies the one presented by Rasmussen. From MAB, we know that the property of being contingent can begin to be exemplified, and thus it may very well seem plausible, as in C1, that contingent intrinsic properties or relations at least permit a causal explanation in one possible world. Moreover, notice that C1 allows for both internal and external causal explanation(s).

possible that such a property could have some causal explanation. Perhaps someone painted the wall that way, or perhaps some natural process caused it to have that color. This is what C1 claims.

The second principle that will be used states that:

(D1) For any finite attribute A, where A consists of possessing a certain property D to the degree μ, and some concrete object x that has A, there is a degree such that it is possible for x to have D to the degree μ – e or μ + e.

What D1 states is that for any finite attribute possessed by a concrete object/substance to a specific numerical degree, that attribute will be contingent since it *could* have been possessed to a greater or lesser degree. To illustrate this, we could imagine a certain object with a measurable finite power. Suppose this object possesses 100 units of power x. Therefore, this degree of power is contingent because it could have been possessed to a degree of 100 + e or 100 – e (for example, 99.999 or 100.001). Therefore, the power possessed by this object will be *contingent* as it could have been exemplified to a *different* degree.

Based on these principles, Rasmussen presents the following strategy to demonstrate that N is a personal agent: From Stage I of the cosmological argument, we know that N is a necessary entity that explains the existence of all contingent concrete things/objects that exist (let's call this set of things "L"). But if N does not possess the ability to act freely (i.e., if it were not a personal agent), then the mere existence of N would be a sufficient condition for the existence of L. Since N is a necessary entity, the existence of L would also be necessary. However, this is contradictory because L is, by definition, contingent. Therefore, N cannot be an impersonal entity.

However, one could propose an impersonal non-deterministic alternative, meaning that even though N is not a personal agent, the explanation it provides for the existence of L is indeterministic. This would imply that N has a fixed degree of probability, denoted as H, of causing the existence of L. However, due to principle (D1), this probabilistic property is contingent because it could have been possessed to a different degree. But according to (C1), this probabilistic

property can be causally explained. This leads to a circular problem since N would need to possess a probabilistic property to causally explain the contingent properties and relations, including the probabilistic properties that N itself possesses in the first place.[64] Nor can one evade Principle C1 by describing the entity's probabilistic disposition as 'indeterminate'—that is, as highly complex, undefined, or epistemically inaccessible to us. Contingency does not depend on our ability to precisely quantify a property in a fixed sense. So long as that disposition is capable of varying across possible worlds, even in ways that are inscrutable or exceedingly complex, it could have been otherwise. If it could have been otherwise, then it is contingent; and if it is contingent, Principle C1 applies.

This problem arises from the assumption that N is an impersonal entity that explains the existence of L in a non-deterministic way. Therefore, N cannot be an impersonal entity with probabilistic properties to causally explain L.

To avoid this result, one might propose that the necessary being has a sui generis probabilistic disposition such that, while the degree or "strength" of its causal production of contingent reality allows for different outputs (thereby avoiding strict determinism and preventing contingents from being necessary), that very probabilistic degree itself could not have been otherwise. On this view, the effects are flexible and diverse, but the underlying probabilistic causal capacity—call it Property X—admits no variation in its magnitude across possible worlds, thus safely avoiding both C1 and D1.

Although this proposal may initially seem plausible, it carries a significant burden of justification. Consider the contrast between the following two claims:

[64] More specifically, for any set M of contingent properties that includes the contingent properties of N, N could not explain M because it would be circular. Rasmussen refers to these sets of contingent properties and relations as "gridscapes."

Z. If probabilistic Property X is instantiated to some determinate numerical or quantitative degree (or even if it is indeterminate), then it seems at least possible that it could have differed slightly (in at least some sense) in some possible world.
and
Z′. If probabilistic Property X is instantiated to some determinate numerical or quantitative degree (or is indeterminate), it is absolutely impossible for it to differ even slightly in any possible world, in any way, shape, or form.

Z requires only the modest claim that there exists at least one possible world in which the degree is slightly different. Z′, by contrast, requires the much stronger claim that across all possible worlds whatsoever, no such variation is even remotely possible. The former is a relatively weak modal claim, while the latter entails universal modal rigidity and therefore demands substantial positive support. But there is none. Absent independent evidence, it is difficult to see what could justify Z′ beyond a prior desire to avoid the original conclusion.

Because of this, the only remaining option is that N is a personal agent. Since its causal activity is not impersonal, it follows that N is a being with volition and free will. Thus, the explanation for the existence of L will be in terms of a personal agent. Below is the formal argument:

1. N is a necessary entity that explains the existence of a specific L in some world *w* (Stage I).

2. N is a (i) personal or (ii) impersonal entity.

3. Suppose that (ii) N is an impersonal entity (reductio).

4. If (ii), then the explanation for the existence of L can be (a) impersonal deterministic or (b) impersonal non-deterministic.

5. Suppose (a) the explanation is impersonal deterministic.

6. Therefore, the mere existence of N is a sufficient condition for the existence of L in *w*.

7. Therefore, the existence of L is metaphysically necessary since N is a necessary being.

8. But the existence of L is contingent (by definition of "set L").

9. But (8) contradicts (7).

10. Therefore, the explanation is (b) impersonal non-deterministic.

11. If the explanation is impersonal non-deterministic, then N explains the existence of L under a fixed probability degree.

12. But if N has the property of causing the existence of L under a fixed probability degree H, it is possible that N could have that property to the degree H+e or H–e (principle (D1)).

13. Therefore, that property of N is contingent.

14. Therefore, that property can be causally explained.

15. But N is the cause of all contingent things and properties in *w* (Stage I and principle (C1)).

16. But then the probabilistic property of N is ultimately explained by the causal activity of N.

17. But (16) is a circular explanation since the probabilistic property of N is explained by the causal activity of N, which requires a probabilistic property in the first place.

18. Therefore, N cannot have a fixed probabilistic property of causing L.

19. But (18) contradicts (11).

20. Therefore, the explanation is neither (a) impersonal deterministic nor (b) impersonal non-deterministic.

21. But (20) contradicts (4).

22. Therefore, the supposition (3) is false.

23. Therefore, N is not an impersonal entity.

24. Therefore, (i) N is a personal entity.

Independent Bridge II

The following argument developed by Pruss (2009) to establish agency involves analyzing the type of explanation that the necessary being provides for the existence of contingent reality, specifically, what kind of causal activity allowed the existence of the contingent. When we examine the possible types of explanations, we encounter three distinct categories: scientific explanations in terms of contingent laws, conditions, and causes; personal explanations in terms of agents and their volition; and conceptual explanations.

An example of a **scientific explanation** would be the explanation of why a kettle of water begins to boil on a stove: heat energy from the burner is transferred into the water, increasing the kinetic energy of its molecules until, at a certain threshold (around 100°C at sea level), the molecules move fast enough to overcome intermolecular attractions, producing vapor bubbles throughout the liquid and resulting in boiling. Another example would be why a dropped apple falls to the ground: given Earth's mass, spacetime curvature (or, in classical terms, gravitational force), and the absence of sufficient opposing forces, the apple accelerates downward at approximately 9.8 m/s^2.

An example of a **conceptual explanation** would be why a "bachelor" must be unmarried: it follows directly from the meaning of the term itself, since being an unmarried adult male is part of what constitutes being a bachelor, so any bachelor cannot simultaneously be married without contradiction. Similarly, a square necessarily has four sides because that property is built into the concept of a square, and once the definition is in place, the conclusion follows without needing any empirical or causal input.

An example of a **personal explanation** would be why someone turns off an alarm clock in the morning: the person wants to avoid oversleeping, believes that silence will allow continued rest, and therefore intentionally presses the off button. Another example would be why a person donates to a charity: she is moved by concern for those in need, believes the donation will help alleviate suffering, and

accordingly chooses to contribute money as a result of those intentions and reasons.

Now, what type of explanation does the necessary being provide for the existence of contingent reality? Pruss argues that a conceptual explanation is not viable because the existence of contingent substances in reality cannot be conceptually explained by something other than the substances themselves. This is because they are self-sufficient, and even if we allow that they can be conceptually explained by their constituent parts, those parts themselves are substantial, leading to the same problem. Therefore, this option is ruled out. With respect to scientific explanations, the entities involved in such explanations are laws and contingent conditions. However, this is not possible in this scenario because, by definition, the necessary being does not exist contingently. Moreover, the beginning of the universe cannot admit a strictly scientific, spatiotemporal explanation, since there is no earlier spacetime in terms of which such an explanation could be given. Therefore, given this triple disjunction, the only remaining option is an explanation in personal terms. This implies that the necessary being explains the existence of contingent reality through its volitional activity, making it an intentional agent. Here is the formal argument:

1. N has necessary existence (Stage I).

2. The explanation for L is (a) scientific, (b) conceptual, or (c) personal.

3. Suppose (a) the explanation for L is scientific.

4. Scientific explanations occur in terms of contingent causes.

5. Therefore, the explanation for L is a contingent cause or causes.

6. But (5) contradicts (1) since N has necessary existence.

7. Therefore, (b) the explanation for L is conceptual.

8. However, the substances in L cannot be conceptually explained by something other than the substances themselves.

9. Therefore, (c) the explanation for L is personal.

10. Therefore, N is a personal being.

These are just two independent bridges to personhood derived from MAB. There are three other independent bridges. To access some of the other independent bridges, we'll need first to determine whether or not spacetime itself is plausibly contingent. If spacetime (and, by extension, matter) is contingent, then the necessary being we've deduced *can't* be spatiotemporal (at least causally prior to spacetime) in its essence. Let me give three reasons why spacetime (and thus the universe) is plausibly contingent.[65]

1) First, the myriad of diversely coherent spacetime models suggest that it's metaphysically possible that spacetime could have been (or can be) genuinely different, thus implying contingency. In modern cosmology, one has such models as oscillating models, quantum loop models, inflationary multiverse models, cyclic-ekpyrotic models, string theory models, and so on. In philosophy of time and space, spacetime could be relative or absolute, and time could be A-theoretical, B-theoretical, or correspond to Growing Block Theory. None of these models need be true or even probable, but so long as *some of them* are simply metaphysically possible, that is enough.

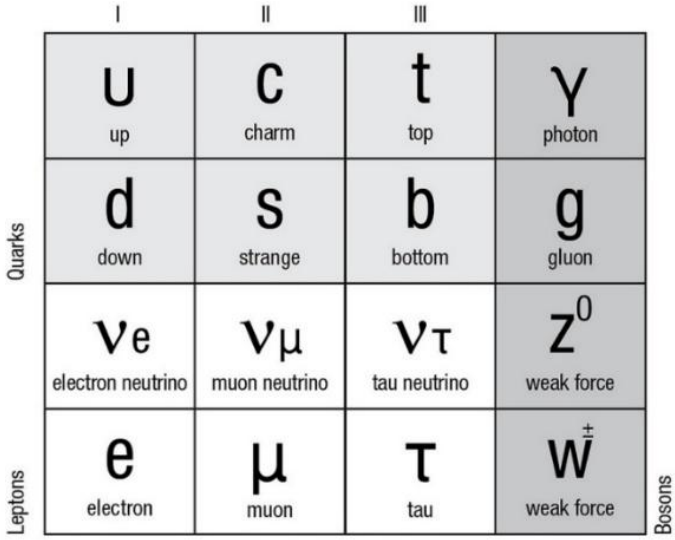
2) Second, an essential property of a necessary being is that it be eternal, that is, without beginning or end. If it's metaphysically possible that spacetime have a beginning (that is, there is a possible world where spacetime began), then it cannot be necessary. But here we come face-to-face once more with some of the most widely respected cosmological models involving a true spatiotemporal commencement. If just one of those models is merely metaphysically possible, this point goes through. Once again, I don't really think anyone will claim that the Standard Cosmological Model, for example, which most cosmologists

[65] Notice that even if one adopts the strong position that spacetime itself—and thus the universe—is metaphysically necessary, this does not undermine the central argument of MAB. In that case, the argument's core reasoning, as well as its first two independent bridges (and Bridge V) to personhood, would still remain intact. For the first contingent beginning need not be the beginning of the universe itself; it could occur within a necessary universe. On such a view, the universe would simply qualify as the necessary concrete reality required by the argument, since it would exist metaphysically necessarily while also serving as the underlying condition within which contingent internal states of affairs arise.

believe is really true, is not only blatantly mistaken but is absolutely metaphysically impossible in *all* possible worlds.

3) Third, as we survey the universe, nothing within it—stars, planets, galaxies, dust, radiation, or any other constituent—appears to exist of necessity. Every such entity is contingent; each could have failed to exist. Indeed, at sufficiently early stages of cosmic history, when the universe was extremely dense and hot, none of these structures yet existed.

The detractor might reply: *Perhaps the underlying matter itself exists necessarily, and all these objects are simply contingent arrangements of that necessary matter.* But this proposal immediately encounters trouble. According to the Standard Model of particle physics, "matter" is not a primitive substance but is constituted by elementary particles—quarks, leptons, gauge bosons, and so on. The universe, at bottom, is simply the total assemblage of these particles in various configurations.



This raises the crucial question: *Could a different inventory of fundamental particles have existed?* Could the basic furniture of reality have been otherwise? Given that the properties of these particles

depend on values such as the weak coupling constant or the Coulomb constant—values that physicists widely acknowledge could have been at least slightly different in some possible world—the answer is yes. A world with even marginally altered constants would contain different particles altogether.

At this juncture, notice what the objector cannot say. He cannot claim that fundamental particles are themselves configurations of some deeper necessary "matter," and that only the configurations could have varied. Fundamental particles *are* the basic units of matter; they are not made *of* anything. If the particles do not exist, the "matter" does not exist. There is no more primordial substrate to appeal to.

But if a different set of elementary particles could have existed, then a different universe would have existed. The identity of the universe depends on its most basic constituents.

An analogy helps clarify this point. Consider your wooden desk. Could *that very desk* have been made of ice? Not merely: "Could you have owned an ice desk of the same shape and size?" but rather: "Could your actual wooden desk have been composed of ice instead of wood?" Obviously not. An ice desk would be a numerically distinct object, not the same desk under a different guise.

Likewise, a universe built from a different stock of fundamental particles—even if arranged in precisely the same structural pattern as ours—would not be *this* universe. It would be a numerically distinct universe. Therefore, the universe does not exist by any necessity of its own nature. Its existence is contingent. Davies comments:

"Even if the laws of physics were unique, it doesn't follow that the physical universe itself is unique . . . the laws of physics must be augmented by cosmic initial conditions . . . There is nothing in present ideas about "laws of initial conditions" remotely to suggest that their consistency with the laws of physics would imply uniqueness. Far from it . . . It seems, then, that the physical

universe does not have to be the way it is: it could have been otherwise."[66]

It therefore follows that the necessary concrete thing cannot be spatiotemporal. It must therefore be spaceless, timeless, and immaterial. (At least causally prior to the universe)

Independent Bridge III

Another argument to establish personal agency has been proposed by Craig (2008), and it consists of analyzing the type of entity that possesses or fulfills the characteristics associated with the necessary entity.

Particularly, Stage I establishes the existence of a necessary entity N with certain causal powers, from which the existence of contingent reality is grounded. However, given its nature, this entity must be essentially immaterial because material composition implies a certain level of contingency in terms of spatial location, composition, and quantity of matter, contrary to its necessary essence. But given these properties (necessity and immateriality), the types of entities that fit this description are reduced to only two: abstract objects or minds.

The first type, abstract objects, are immaterial and necessary entities that exist outside the concrete realm, understood as the causal network among objects that have the capacity to affect each other in some of their properties or relations. On the other hand, mental entities are those that possess intentionality and causal capacity.

Now, since N is the cause or ultimate foundation of contingent reality, it follows that it must possess some kind of causal power or explanatory capacity concerning contingent objects; otherwise, it could not be the ultimate causal explanation of them, contrary to the conclusion of Stage I. But if this is the case, N cannot be an abstract

[66] Paul Davies, *The Mind of God* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 169.

entity, as by definition abstract objects are outside the concrete realm and, therefore, causally inert. The number 7, for example, can't cause any effects.[67] Due to this, the type of entity that corresponds to the nature of N is mental entities.

One might object that a necessary concrete being could belong to a sui generis metaphysical category, such that the distinction between "abstracta" and "minds" presents a false dichotomy. Yet this is far from evident. If a being is genuinely immaterial and necessarily existent, then it appears either to possess consciousness or not. If it lacks consciousness, it is difficult to see what it could be other than something analogous to an abstract object. It cannot plausibly be identified with a mere "force" or "field." Forces, as understood in physics, operate within spacetime and are characterized through relations among physical quantities such as mass and acceleration (e.g., Newton's Second Law, $F = ma$). Likewise, fields are defined as physical quantities distributed across spacetime that mediate physical interactions. Both concepts are therefore inherently embedded within the spatiotemporal structure of the physical universe and presuppose its existence rather than explain it. Appeal to abstract objects cannot suffice, since abstracta are widely regarded as causally inert. By contrast, if the being in question possesses consciousness, then it would seem most naturally to qualify as a mind.

Furthermore, contemporary philosophy of mind reinforces this dichotomy. Philosophers such as David Chalmers (1996) argue that the best way to account for the emergence of consciousness is to suppose that fundamental reality itself enjoys proto-conscious properties. If this is correct, a necessary foundation may contain *unlimited* cognitive or proto-cognitive resources, since it is the ultimate ground of *every possible* configuration of consciousness. A unified, immaterial, necessary foundation possessing unlimited cognitive resources is very

[67] The idea that there may exist causally efficacious, special platonic forms is a highly niche minority view that is widely rejected, and in any case would require positive justification. An abstract object, *by definition,* is causally inert. But even if we allow for this possibility, it's ultimately rendered null by the other independent bridges, which rule out an impersonal timeless necessity.

plausibly a Mind. Therefore, the inference holds: N is an intentional agent with mental capacities.

Here is the argument in formal notation:

1. N is a necessary entity that explains the existence of contingent reality at some world *w* (Stage I).

2. If (1), then N is immaterial (since materiality implies contingency).

3. If (2), then N is (a) an abstract entity or (b) a mind.

4. Suppose N is (a) an abstract entity.

5. But abstract objects are causally inert.

6. But (5) contradicts (1), as in that case, N could not be the ultimate cause of contingency.

7. Therefore, N is (b) a mind.

Independent Bridge IV

This next argument comes from Craig (2008) once more and has been elaborated upon by other philosophers. We thus have a timeless necessary concrete thing. But now we must ask, how can a timeless cause be capable of producing a temporal effect that begins to obtain? Stated differently, how does a timeless necessary cause produce a temporal effect (that begins) in some possible world *w*? How can a timeless cause produce a temporal effect?

If the timeless cause were merely an impersonal force or set of conditions that is *actualized* (i.e., dispositioned or activated to produce its effect), then the effect would be *eternal.*[68] If the timeless cause were

[68] Here, "eternal" is used in the sense of timeless eternality, which should be distinguished from temporal eternality. Timeless eternality refers to a mode of existence outside of time altogether, in which a being does not persist through earlier and later moments, but simply exists in a single, atemporal state without temporal succession—for example, a hypothetical abstract mathematical object or

merely an impersonal force or set of conditions that is *not actualized*, then the effect would *never exist*. It can't go from non-actualized to actualized (or vice-versa) in essence because it is timeless and therefore *changeless*. So how can we solve the dilemma?

One way to see the difficulty is by reflecting on the different types of causal relations. In event/event causation, one event causes another. For example, the brick's striking the windowpane causes the pane to shatter. This kind of causal relation clearly involves a beginning of the effect in time, since it is a relation between events which occur at specific times. In state/state causation one state of affairs causes another state of affairs to exist. For example, the water's having a certain surface tension is the cause of the wood's floating on the water. In this sort of causal relation, the effect need not have a beginning: the wood could theoretically be floating eternally on the water. If the wood begins to float on the water, then this will be a case of event/event causation: the wood's beginning to float is the result of its being thrown into the water. Now the difficulty that arises in the case of the cause of the beginning of spacetime is that we seem to have a peculiar case of state/event causation: the cause is a timeless state, but the effect is an event that occurred at a specific moment in the finite past. Such state/event causation doesn't seem to make sense, since a state sufficient for the existence of its effect should have a state as its effect.

Neither can one simply follow Alex Malpass in appealing to an "impersonal indeterminacy" in a timeless cause to explain how it could

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structure that does not "endure" or "change" across moments because no moments apply to it at all. By contrast, temporal eternality refers to existing within time without beginning or end, such that a being always exists at every time and persists through an infinite sequence of earlier and later moments—for example, a hypothetical universe that has always existed and will continue indefinitely, with no first or last moment. It is also worth noting a third possibility: existence in undifferentiated time, in which temporal reality is present but lacks any internal division into discrete moments such as days, hours, or years. On this view, there is still "time" in a minimal sense, but it does not come packaged into measurable or segmented intervals; instead, it is more like a uniform temporal expanse without clock-like structure or temporal markers. This can be contrasted with ordinary temporal eternality, where time is structured and sequential, and with timeless eternality, where there is no temporal structure at all.

bring about a temporal effect that begins.[69] Indeterminism may indeed allow for variation across possible worlds—such that a cause produces one effect in w_1 and a different effect in w_2, unlike strict determinism. But this kind of modal openness does not by itself eliminate the deeper issue: the intrinsic *temporal asymmetry* built into the relation between cause and effect. A timeless, impersonal probability distribution is still a timeless state. Because it lacks volition, an impersonal mechanism has no capacity to "choose" or intend a specific temporal coordinate for its effect. If it indeterministically triggers its effect, it must do so timelessly, which would still result in an eternal effect rather than a temporal beginning. In other words, if the impersonal causal exertion is timeless, the effect produced by that exertion must be co-eternal with the cause. The indeterminacy only dictates *whether* (or what) it fires in a given possible world (e.g., it fires something specific in w_1 but not in w_2). But if it *does* fire, it fires from eternity, producing an eternal effect. Only a personal agent can possess a timeless *intention* whose content specifically decrees a temporal beginning.

Philosophers call this type of causation “agent causation,” and because the agent is free, he can initiate new effects by freely bringing about conditions which were not previously present. As some philosophers say, a man sitting changelessly from eternity could *freely choose* to stand up! By “freely choose,” one need not mean that he suddenly changes his mind, but that he freely and eternally wills to engender an effect in time (e.g., "Let the universe begin at $t = 0$”). Free choice, as we've seen, strongly indicates personhood in at least some minimal sense. Here is the argument in formal notation:

1. N is a timeless necessary entity that produces a temporal effect which begins at some world *w*.

2. Per the Law of Excluded Middle (LEM), N is either impersonal or personal.

3. If N is impersonal and timeless (and thus changeless), it is either timelessly (i) actualized or (ii) not actualized to produce its effect.

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[69] See the debate between William Lane Craig and Alex Malpass at: https://youtu.be/zQBY5K-Ns2Y?si=c9Gh4-teyirc2hPd.

4. Suppose N is impersonal and timelessly actualized (reductio).

5. But then the effect would eternally proceed from N.

6. But (5) contradicts (1), since the effect is temporal and begins, and is not eternal.

7. So N is not impersonal and timelessly actualized.

8. Suppose N is impersonal and timelessly not actualized (reductio).

9. But then the effect would never proceed from N, and thus never exist.

10. But (9) contradicts (1), since the effect is temporal and begins, and is not non-existent.

11. So N is not impersonal and timelessly unactualized.

12. So N is not impersonal, whether timelessly actualized or unactualized (from (7) and (11)).

13. Therefore, N is personal (from (2) and (12)).

Independent Bridge V

Another way to probe the personhood of a necessary concrete being (N) is to evaluate what, apparently, it seems to have produced. For if there exists a necessary concrete thing, the most fundamental thing which is capable of causation, then it seems plausible that it may be the cause of our universe, perhaps at the Big Bang. We may ask: once we know such a being exists, what can be said about its nature in light of the universe we actually inhabit? One of the most remarkable features of our cosmos is its delicate fine-tuning—the extraordinary precision in the initial conditions and constants of physics that allow for order, complexity, and ultimately conscious life. This phenomenon is not incidental but central, for it provides a powerful inductive reason to infer that N is not merely necessary but also intelligent.

The fact of fine-tuning is well-established in contemporary cosmology and physics. Consider a few examples. The cosmological constant, which governs the rate of cosmic expansion, is set to a value so precise that if it differed by one part in 10^120, the universe would either have collapsed back upon itself or expanded too rapidly for stars and galaxies ever to form. The ratio of the electromagnetic force to gravity is similarly precarious: if gravity were marginally stronger, stars would burn too quickly and collapse; if weaker, they would never ignite nuclear fusion at all. The strong nuclear force also reveals this knife's-edge balance: an increase of just 2% would prevent hydrogen from existing, while a decrease of 5% would preclude the formation of elements beyond helium. Finally, the low-entropy initial state of the universe, which made possible the unfolding of ordered processes, represents an improbability on the order of 1 in 10^(10^123), as calculated by Penrose (1989, p. 343). These examples are not isolated curiosities; they reflect a consistent pattern—our universe appears astonishingly constrained in life-permitting directions.

Once N is acknowledged, the natural question arises: why does the universe it grounds display such precision rather than chaos? Here the inductive argument takes shape:

1. N exists as a necessary concrete being (Stage I).
2. The actual universe exhibits extraordinary fine-tuning in its laws, constants, and initial conditions.
3. If N were impersonal (a brute force, mechanical principle, or abstract necessity), the emergence of fine-tuning would be inexplicable, for chaotic, sterile, or disordered configurations would be at least equally expected.
4. Whenever we encounter highly specific and purposive complexity—that is, order both improbable and functional—and a viable causal candidate possibly capable of intellect is *already* delineated, intelligence is the best explanation.
5. Therefore, the best explanation for the fine-tuning of the cosmos is that N is intelligent and intentionally structured the universe.

The conclusion arises from the sharp contrast between what would be expected under impersonal necessity and what is actually observed. Pure metaphysical necessity entails nothing about order or intelligibility. A world of random chaos, sterile voids, or unstable laws would be no less possible. Indeed, one might argue that disorder is ontologically more probable, since there are vastly more ways for things to fall into chaos than into the razor-thin corridors of life-permitting order. The fact that our universe lies within such a narrow, highly specified range suggests that the necessary being behind it did not merely generate reality blindly but acted with intention.

Objections merit consideration. Some argue that fine-tuning is simply the result of chance. But the sheer improbability strains credulity: to suppose that constants balanced to one part in 10^120 (not to mention Penrose's calculation) emerged by accident is to accept a probability so negligible as to be practically indistinguishable from zero. Others appeal to a multiverse, suggesting that if there are infinitely many universes, it is not surprising that one happens to be life-permitting. Yet this move does not dissolve the explanatory demand. Even a multiverse would plausibly be grounded in N. Why, then, would N generate a structured ensemble of universes governed by meta-laws that produce order at all, rather than anarchic chaos? The fine-tuning problem simply shifts to a higher level. Still others invoke the anthropic principle: we should not be surprised to observe a life-permitting universe, since we could not exist in any other. But this is a tautological observation, not an explanation. It tells us why we cannot observe a sterile universe but not why such an extraordinarily improbable universe exists in the first place. To use John Leslie's famous analogy, if one survives a firing squad of one hundred trained marksmen, the fact that one is alive to register surprise does not diminish the need for explanation (Leslie 1989, pp. 13–14). The rational inference is intentionality, not mere luck.

But, one might worry, intuitions can be misleading. We need some objective mathematical framework if we are to properly adjudicate. Here, it would be instructive to consider *Bayes' Theorem.* Bayes' theorem is a direct consequence of the basic axioms of probability theory as formalized by Andrey Kolmogorov in his *Foundations of the*

Theory of Probability (1933). Under the Kolmogorov axioms, conditional probability is defined as $P(A \mid B) = \frac{P(A \cap B)}{P(B)}$ whenever $P(B) > 0$. By symmetry of intersection, $P(A \cap B) = P(B \cap A)$, and therefore $P(B \cap A) = P(B \mid A)P(A)$. Substituting this into the definition of $P(A \mid B)$ yields Bayes' theorem:

$$P(A \mid B) = \frac{P(B \mid A)P(A)}{P(B)}.$$

In plain language, this equation tells you **how to update your belief in A after learning that B is true.**

Think of it like this: $P(A)$ is your *initial belief* that A is true — your starting point, before considering B.

$P(B \mid A)$ tells you how likely B would be *if A were true*. It measures how strongly A predicts B.

$P(B)$ tells you how likely B is *overall*, considering all ways it could happen.

$P(A \mid B)$ is your *new belief* in A **after** taking B into account.

This equation is not an optional interpretive tool; it is a strict *logical consequence* of the probability axioms themselves. Once one accepts the coherence constraints of rational credence, Bayes' theorem follows *necessarily.* Bayes' theorem is helpful here because it allows us to ask a precise comparative question: given the evidence, which hypothesis should rationally gain support?[70] In the present context, let H_1 be the

[70] When articulating the Bayesian fine-tuning argument, it is necessary to acknowledge Mike Almeida's provocative thesis: if S5 operates as the logic of metaphysical necessity, it strictly precludes independent evidential or probabilistic reasoning concerning the existence of a necessary being. In this context, however, the fine-tuning argument serves merely as an internal epistemic heuristic to navigate personal uncertainty, rather than asserting an objective, ontologically normative metaphysical probability. To be charitable to the defender of the evidential (or probabilistic) problem of evil, one must concede that they, too, could employ their argument as a similar internal epistemic guide. Yet, a fundamental asymmetry remains. The deductive (or logical) problem of evil is widely regarded by contemporary philosophers as having been decisively undermined, largely due to Alvin Plantinga's Free Will Defense. Consequently, the probabilistic problem of evil operates without a deductive anchor. By contrast, the fine-tuning argument

hypothesis that the necessary concrete being N is personal or intelligent, and let H_2 be the hypothesis that N is impersonal and non-intentional. Let E be the evidence that the universe began in an extraordinarily special, extremely low-entropy state. Bayes' theorem then looks like this:

$$\mathrm{P(H1 \mid E)} = \frac{\mathrm{(P(E \mid H1)P(H1))}}{\mathrm{(P(E \mid H1)P(H1)} + \mathrm{P(E \mid H2)P(H2))}}$$

It is important to be clear from the outset that the probabilities used here are not being treated as literal frequencies in a cosmic lottery. In contemporary fine-tuning discussions, especially where cosmology's measure problem arises, many philosophers instead use an epistemic or "ur-probability" framework: the question is what a rational agent should expect before learning that the universe has the very special boundary conditions it in fact has. That is the modest and appropriate sense of probability at work here.[71]

The scientific core of the evidence is not controversial: the early universe had extraordinarily low entropy.[72] Sean Carroll and Jennifer Chen explicitly say that the origin of the Second Law traces back to

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presented here is moored to the rigorously deductive foundation of the Modal Argument from Beginnings (MAB) and its corresponding deductive bridges.
A critic might attempt to bypass this asymmetry by appealing to the external version of the problem of evil, which is sometimes framed deductively by asserting the definitive existence of "gratuitous" evil. However, this move covertly smuggles in staggering probabilistic assumptions. To definitively declare an evil gratuitous requires one to possess almost infallible confidence that a specific instance of suffering serves no greater purpose or role whatsoever. Such a judgment demands an impossible level of omniscience, especially given the topological and combinatorial complexity of human free choices, their compounding historical ripple effects, and the vast, unseen landscape of divine counterfactuals.
For a formal elaboration on the logical constraints of probabilistic evidence regarding a necessary being, see: Almeida, M. (2023). Evil is not evidence. *Religious Studies*, 59, S109-S117. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412522000038.

[71] Sebastian Friederich, "Fine-Tuning," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Stanford, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, accessed April 20, 2026); Robin Collins, "The Teleological Argument: An Exploration of the Fine-Tuning of the Universe," in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 202–281.

[72] Sean M. Carroll and Jennifer Chen, "Spontaneous Inflation and the Origin of the Arrow of Time," arXiv:hep-th/0410270 (2004), 3–5.

initial conditions, that the early universe had "an extremely low entropy," and that this low entropy is tied to the universe's large-scale smoothness. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy likewise summarizes Penrose's conclusion that universes resembling ours occupy only one part in $10^{10^{123}}$ of the available phase-space volume.[73,74] So, the datum here is not "life exists" in the abstract, but the much more specific fact that the universe began in a remarkably non-generic gravitational condition.

To understand why Penrose's number is so striking, one must begin with Boltzmann's statistical conception of entropy. As Lebowitz explains, a macrostate corresponds to a vast region of phase space containing many microstates, and Boltzmann entropy is given by $S_B = k \log | \Gamma_M |$, where $| \Gamma_M |$ is the phase-space volume associated with that macrostate. The key point is simple: high-entropy macrostates correspond to vastly larger regions of phase space, and low-entropy macrostates correspond to vastly smaller ones.[75] So when physicists say

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[73] Roger Penrose, *The Road to Reality: A Complete Guide to the Laws of the Universe* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004), 728–31; Friederich, "Fine-Tuning."

[74] Some detractors have claimed that Penrose simply surveyed all mathematical possibilities—presumably an infinite set—and that his calculation is therefore spurious, uninformative about the actual universe, or even outright false. However, this criticism rests on a misunderstanding of what the calculation is doing and how mathematical structures are used in physical reasoning. In scientific practice, one does not "scan" all mathematical possibilities in any exhaustive sense; rather, one works within a well-defined mathematical model and derives results from its internal constraints, symmetry conditions, and measure-theoretic structure. Penrose's reasoning concerns the relative volume (in a suitably defined phase space) of initial conditions corresponding to low-entropy versus high-entropy states, not a brute enumeration of all abstract mathematical objects. The relevant space is not the class of all conceivable mathematical systems, but a specific state space representing physically possible configurations of the universe under the assumed laws. Moreover, probability assignments in such contexts are not based on counting possibilities, but on measures over continuous spaces, where "most" states are defined relative to a natural invariant measure (e.g., Liouville measure in Hamiltonian mechanics). On this framework, claims about extreme improbability are statements about the structure of the state space under the dynamics, not about surveying or comparing all mathematical structures. Consequently, the argument is neither an empirical census nor an arbitrary traversal of infinities, but a mathematically grounded inference about the distribution of physically admissible initial conditions within a precisely specified dynamical system.

[75] Joel L. Lebowitz, "Boltzmann's Entropy and Time's Arrow," *Physics Today* 46, no. 9 (1993): 32–38.

a state is “low entropy,” they are saying it occupies an exceptionally tiny portion of the available state space.

Gravity makes this especially dramatic. In ordinary non-gravitating systems, smoothness can look like equilibrium. But with gravity, smoothness is not the generic high-entropy state. Carroll and Chen emphasize that our universe remains smooth on large scales, and that this smoothness is itself finely tuned; they then compare the actual entropy of the universe with how much larger it could have been if more of the mass-energy were stored in black holes.[76] They note that black-hole entropy is proportional to horizon area, that supermassive black holes already dominate much of our universe’s entropy budget, and that if all the mass in the observable universe were in a single black hole, the entropy would be vastly larger still. Their conclusion is straightforward: our universe’s entropy is very small, and the early universe’s entropy was smaller yet.[77] Penrose’s broader idea, reviewed by Claus Kiefer, is that the Big Bang had exceptionally low gravitational entropy, a thought Penrose expresses through his Weyl curvature hypothesis: the Weyl curvature is very small at past singularities, i.e. at the beginning.[78]

So what exactly does Penrose’s famous figure mean? It does **not** mean that physicists literally watched universes being drawn from an urn. It means that, using the standard statistical-mechanical idea that larger phase-space regions correspond to more generic states, the subset of initial conditions capable of yielding a universe like ours is fantastically tiny compared with the full range of available gravitationally allowed states. The reason the number is so extreme is that entropy is logarithmic in phase-space volume: once the entropy difference is large enough, the corresponding fraction of admissible states becomes unimaginably small. In plain language, the Big Bang was not merely

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[76] For independent corroboration, see Jacob D. Bekenstein, “Black Holes and Entropy,” *Physical Review D* 7, no. 8 (1973): 2333–2346; Stephen W. Hawking, “Black Holes and Thermodynamics,” *Physical Review D* 13, no. 2 (1976): 191–197.
[77] Carroll and Chen, “Spontaneous Inflation,” 3–4; Chas A. Egan and Charles H. Lineweaver, “A Larger Estimate of the Entropy of the Universe,” *Astrophysical Journal* 710, no. 2 (2010): 1825–1834.
[78] Claus Kiefer, “On a Quantum Weyl Curvature Hypothesis,” arXiv:2111.02137 (2022), 1–2; Penrose, *The Road to Reality*, 730–31.

"ordered." It was ordered in a way that, from the standpoint of gravitational statistics, is extraordinarily special.

At this point an important objection arises: does cosmology not face a genuine measure problem? Yes, it does.[79] The Stanford Encyclopedia discusses exactly this difficulty, noting that cosmological measures and typicality assumptions are controversial, and Carroll and Chen themselves say that there is not always a reliable measure on the full space of initial conditions. But that concession does not neutralize the argument. First, even Carroll and Chen say that, absent some special story, low-entropy states are less likely than high-entropy ones if conditions are "randomly chosen," and they explicitly invoke Liouville's theorem as preserving relative phase-space measure.[80] Second, if one does not want to speak in terms of literal physical probability, the same point can be restated epistemically: a rational agent would not, absent further information, expect the universe to begin in a fantastically tiny low-entropy region rather than in one of the overwhelmingly larger high-entropy regions. So the argument does not require a complete solution to the measure problem. It requires only the far weaker claim that extremely special low-entropy boundary conditions are, in the absence of a selector, not what one should rationally expect.

That lets us formulate the comparison more carefully. Under H_2, reality is ultimately impersonal and non-intentional. Such a hypothesis, by itself, contains no preference for a tiny life- and order-permitting subset of initial conditions over the vastly larger class of generic, higher-entropy alternatives. If someone now adds a law, principle, or mechanism that strongly concentrates the universe into that tiny subset, then the view is no longer the bare impersonal hypothesis; it has been supplemented by a highly nontrivial selector principle. In other words, the burden does not disappear. It simply moves. Under bare H_2, the natural expectation is genericity, not exquisite initial specialness.

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[79] Friederich, "Fine-Tuning"; Chris Smeenk, "Predictability Crisis in Early Universe Cosmology," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Modern Physics* 46 (2014): 122–133.
[80] Carroll and Chen, "Spontaneous Inflation," 11–12.

Under H_1, by contrast, there is at least *some* principled reason why a highly ordered, intelligible, stable, law-governed cosmos might be selected. A personal or intelligent source of reality can, in principle, aim at ends, prefer order to chaos, and value the realization of a world capable of structure, discoverability, agency, and embodied moral life. Notice what is *not* being claimed. The claim is not that H_1 predicts our exact universe with anything like certainty. The claim is only comparative: E is far less surprising on a personal source than on a purely impersonal one. That is exactly the sort of comparative claim Bayes' theorem is designed to capture. Theism or personhood need not make E likely in an absolute sense; it need only make E less improbable than bare impersonhood.

This is where the earlier vulnerability about "arbitrary likelihoods" can be handled directly. The point is not that one may simply invent numbers until one gets the desired result. The point is that the likelihood under H_2 is constrained from above by the non-genericity of the initial condition unless one adds a further selector principle, while the likelihood under H_1 is constrained from below by the fact that intentional agency can at least make ordered, complexity-permitting worlds purposive rather than accidental. The evidential force does not depend on claiming that $P(E \mid H_1)$ is large. It depends on the much weaker and much more defensible claim that $P(E \mid H_1)$ is vastly greater than $P(E \mid H_2)$.

Now, precisely to avoid overstating the case, we will not use Penrose's full figure of $10^{-10^{123}}$. That number is famous, real, and philosophically important, but one may reasonably worry that any exact estimate of the universe's primordial gravitational entropy could be revised by a future theory of quantum gravity. So let us grant the skeptic an almost absurd concession. Let us replace Penrose's number with the incomparably milder estimate:

$$P(E \mid H_2) = 10^{-10^5}$$

This is not a minor adjustment. It is an *enormous* retreat, by a hundred sextillion *googols* of orders of magnitude, from Penrose's full estimate. It says, in effect: suppose Penrose were not merely somewhat too high, but wrong by an almost unimaginably vast margin; suppose the real

improbability were not 1 in $10^{10^{123}}$, but only 1 in 10^{10^5}. Even then, the point would remain. This matters because a low-entropy initial condition is not some decorative extra in the story of the universe. It is what makes ordered processes possible in the first place. Without a very low-entropy beginning, there are no large thermodynamic gradients to drive stable structure, stars, chemistry, complex organization, and ultimately life itself. In that sense, the specialness of the initial condition is not peripheral to the evidence; it is central to it.[81]

But here is the striking point: even the much smaller figure 10^{-10^5} is still an *extraordinarily* modest benchmark. To reach a number that small, one needs only about 332,000 binary variables, since $2^{332{,}000}$ already yields on the order of 10^{10^5}. As a simple illustration, that is roughly the number of sites in a tiny atomic lattice about 70 atoms wide, 70 atoms tall, and 70 atoms deep, if each site contributes just one yes-or-no possibility. That is not a city. It is not a planet. It is not even a visible speck of dust. It is a minute microscopic fragment of matter. And the universe is surely *at least* that complex—indeed, incomparably more so. So if even such a tiny toy system already reaches the 10^{-10^5} range, then treating that value as a conservative lower bound is not bold. It is breathtakingly cautious. That directly

[81] One might object that a divine designer could have created a life-permitting universe using entirely different physical constants—such as a radically altered gravitational force where life simply adapts to emerge differently. However, this objection fundamentally misunderstands the initial low-entropy state. Unlike a tunable numerical parameter (such as gravity or the cosmological constant), extremely low entropy is a global boundary condition. It is the absolute thermodynamic prerequisite for *any* stable structure, macroscopic causation, or life to exist. Because entropy measures disorder and the unavailability of energy to do work, a low-entropy origin provides the vital thermodynamic gradient required to drive physical processes. Consider a watermill: it functions only because water flows from a high reservoir down to a lower basin. In a stagnant, level pool (representing maximum entropy, or thermal equilibrium), the wheel *cannot* turn to do work, regardless of how one tweaks the water's density or the mill's design. A universe born in high entropy would simply be a featureless, static soup. Ultimately, if a transcendent Mind exists, it is entirely rational to suppose it would desire order and stable structure *at all*, rather than perpetual, sterile chaos. Because low entropy is intrinsically essential to the existence of any ordered system, its extraordinarily precise presence is at least partially expected under a theistic hypothesis, standing in sharp contrast to the blind indifference of bare impersonhood.

answers the worry that the argument stands or falls with Penrose's exact number. It does not.

Now let us handicap the personal hypothesis just as severely. Assign it an extraordinarily hostile prior:[82]

$$P(H_1) = 10^{-100}.$$

Written out in decimal form, this is

0.00000000000

In other words, on this view, theism is treated as comically implausible—akin to a fictional joke that, for all practical intents and purposes, is effectively impossible.

Let the impersonal hypothesis therefore receive essentially the entire prior probability, making it effectively *certain* for the purposes of the calculation:

$$P(H_2) = 1 - 10^{-100} \approx 1.$$

Now make a second massive concession:[83]

$$P(E \mid H_1) = 10^{-100}.$$

Again, this is

0.00000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000001

This figure should not be read as a natural estimate of the personal hypothesis. It is an intentional and severe dialectical handicap. It says: even if ultimate reality is personal, we will still treat the observed low-entropy beginning as fantastically unlikely. In effect, it assumes that even if we were already *certain* that God exists, we would nonetheless regard it as *virtually impossible* that He would create a universe in such an ordered, precisely calibrated, low-entropy condition. This is skepticism pushed to an extreme. It directly answers the concern that the personal hypothesis has been allowed to do the explanatory work. Here, it is being forced to do almost none of it.

It is thus insufficient to say, as some skeptics (e.g., Graham Oppy) do, that the intentions of a transcendent mind are so utterly inscrutable to us that we cannot assign any probability to it producing a universe with order, organization, and stable structure. Is it really completely inscrutable that a mind—if we already granted that such a mind exists—might at least partially prefer, or intend toward, order and organization rather than sterile chaos? That does not seem obvious. In

[83] This value is likewise not presented as a scientific estimate. It is an intentionally punitive assumption, adopted to ensure that the personal hypothesis is granted no dialectical advantage from a generous likelihood assignment.

fact, it seems well within the range of intelligible mental states we already understand: minds form goals, prefer structured environments, and act toward coherent ends rather than maximal disorder.

In any case, there is a significant logical gap between "inscrutable" and "impossible." Here, however, the number effectively treats the hypothesis as if that gap has been closed entirely. It proceeds as though the probability of such a mind producing an ordered universe is, for all practical purposes, absolutely negligible. In doing so, it replaces epistemic humility about uncertainty with an assumption that is functionally indistinguishable from impossibility.

At this stage, the cleanest way to see the force of the argument is through **odds form** rather than by staring only at the final posterior. Bayes' theorem implies:

$$\frac{P(H_1 \mid E)}{P(H_2 \mid E)} = \frac{P(E \mid H_1)}{P(E \mid H_2)} \cdot \frac{P(H_1)}{P(H_2)}.$$

The first factor is the Bayes factor; the second is the prior odds. Here the Bayes factor is:

$$\frac{P(E \mid H_1)}{P(E \mid H_2)} = \frac{10^{-100}}{10^{-10^5}} = 10^{99900}.$$

The prior odds against H_1 are approximately 10^{100}: 1. So to overturn the hostile prior, one would need a Bayes factor merely greater than 10^{100}. But our conservative Bayes factor is 10^{99900}. In other words, the evidence exceeds the threshold needed to overcome the prior by **99,800 orders of magnitude**. That is why the result is so stable: the conclusion does not hang delicately on a single sharpened knife-edge. There is massive room for error built into the calculation.

Consider this magnitude carefully. While it's important to understand that we are dealing here with epistemic probabilities regarding a singular cosmic origin rather than the repeated empirical trials of the hard sciences, comparing the thresholds of rational confidence is illuminating. In contemporary particle physics, the standard for a discovery announcement is typically a 5σ significance threshold. Under

standard statistical approximations, this corresponds to a Bayes factor on the order of roughly 10^6 to 10^8 in favor of the signal hypothesis. To put this in context, the Higgs boson was announced as a monumental discovery once the evidence reached that level of statistical strength—a level universally regarded as decisive within that domain. In our calculation, the evidence does not merely meet this threshold of decisiveness; it dwarfs it, exceeding the scientific gold standard by tens of thousands of orders of magnitude.

If one now substitutes the numbers into Bayes' theorem directly, one gets:

$$P(H_1 \mid E) = \frac{10^{-100} \cdot 10^{-100}}{10^{-100} \cdot 10^{-100} + 10^{-10^5}(1 - 10^{-100})} \approx \frac{1}{1 + 10^{-99800}}$$
$$\approx 1 - 10^{-99800} \approx 1.$$

So under assumptions that are radically stacked against personhood at every stage, the posterior probability still ends up arbitrarily close to 1 (i.e., near-certainty).

This also answers the worry that "double penalizing" H_1 somehow undermines its explanatory force. The proper lesson is comparative, not absolute. The argument is not saying that a personal source *barely* explains the evidence. It is saying that even after we artificially cripple the personal hypothesis with a tiny prior and a tiny likelihood, the evidence still favors it over bare impersonhood by an overwhelming margin. So the low value assigned to $P(E \mid H_1)$ is not part of the case *for* personhood; it is a concession made *against* personhood to show how resilient the evidential comparison remains. If one used a less punitive and more natural value for $P(E \mid H_1)$, the result would only strengthen.

The final conclusion, then, is conditional but very strong. Conditional on the modest and standard statistical-mechanical thought that highly ordered initial states occupy vastly smaller regions of state space than generic ones; conditional on the uncontroversial physical fact that the early universe was extraordinarily low in gravitational entropy; and conditional on the equally modest philosophical claim that a personal

cause can purposively select order whereas a bare impersonal cause cannot do so without further special machinery, the low-entropy beginning of the universe strongly favors personhood over impersonhood. One need not insist on Penrose's exact $10^{-10^{123}}$ estimate. One need not solve the full measure problem in cosmology. One need not give personhood a generous prior. A tiny fraction of Penrose's original force is already enough. So, in other words, if fine-tuning is even partially apt, it makes it *overwhelmingly* more plausible that the necessary being is personal rather than impersonal.

Nor does an appeal to physical or mathematical necessity succeed. Such an approach would require us to claim that even a slightly different initial entropy condition was absolutely impossible. But this is highly implausible. Not only is a different condition possible; by chance alone, it would be *overwhelmingly more likely*. Appeals to a future Theory of Everything—such as string theory or M-theory—do not resolve the issue. Even Stephen Hawking argued that physical necessity is a vain hope: "M theory cannot predict the parameters of the standard model. Obviously, the values of the parameters we measure must be compatible with the development of life. . . . But within the anthropically allowed range, the parameters can have any values. So much for string theory predicting the fine structure constant."[84] He concluded:

"Even when we understand the ultimate theory, it won't tell us much about how the universe began. It cannot predict the dimensions of spacetime, the gauge group, or other parameters of the low energy effective theory. . . . It won't determine how this energy is divided between conventional matter, and a cosmological constant, or quintessence. . . . So to come back to the question. . . . Does string theory predict the state of the universe? The answer is that it does not. It allows a vast landscape of

[84] S. W. Hawking, "Cosmology from the Top Down," paper presented at the Davis Cosmic Inflation Meeting, U. C. Davis, May 29, 2003.

possible universes, in which we occupy an anthropically permitted location."

It is not merely speculative but conceptually misguided to suppose that the universe's extraordinarily low-entropy beginning was somehow "forced" by an as-yet-unknown dynamical law. Laws and initial conditions do different work: a law tells you how a system evolves, while an initial condition tells you what state the system starts in. The relation is somewhat like chess: the rules determine how the pieces may move, but they do not determine the opening move or position. Likewise, a physical law can constrain the evolution of entropy from a given macrostate, but it does not by itself supply the special low-entropy macrostate from which the cosmic story begins. In fact, serious discussions of the arrow of time explicitly treat the low-entropy past as a boundary-condition problem, not as something automatically generated by the equations alone. As Bradley Dowden says, "Is entropy low in the distant past of our observable universe? Yes, it is, but why is this so? This fact about low entropy is *not derivable* from any of the fundamental laws, and it is not known a priori. Richard Feynman highlighted the need for this assumption."[85]

Nor is it scientifically apt to imagine that some deeper law would simply make the relevant probability "equal to 1." In modern statistical mechanics, entropy is tied to probability, multiplicity, and coarse-graining; Boltzmann himself called the Second Law "only theorems of probability," and he stressed that it cannot be proved from the equations of motion alone. And on the gravitational side, black-hole thermodynamics is itself an entropy theory: black holes are treated as thermodynamic objects with entropy proportional to horizon area. To use a more mundane illustration, an Apple Store (for example) is relatively low entropy largely due to the organizational and causal processes that make it so. That order is not something a physical law 'forces' with probability 1; it is a contingent arrangement caused by specific conditions. Likewise, the universe's initial low-entropy state is best understood as a special boundary condition, not as the inevitable

[85] Dowden, Bradley H. "Arrow of Time." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://iep.utm.edu/arrow-of-time/.

output of some hidden dynamical law. Entropy is system-relative and state-dependent; it is not a free-floating law that guarantees a particular arrangement. A law governs how a system evolves, but the system's initial state is a separate fact.

So, the real issue is not that we have the law but have not yet found the last missing equation. The issue is that a law, by its nature, governs what happens from a boundary condition; it does not erase the need for a boundary condition, or an explanation thereof, in the first place.

Finally, this "vast landscape of possible universes" mentioned by Hawking is merely a conceptual framework—a mathematical description of the many ways *our own* universe could have been—not evidence for an actual multiverse.

Nor does appeal to an *infinite* multiverse weaken this conclusion, for any such multiverse—if it exists at all—would still be ontologically grounded in the same necessary concrete being already independently deduced, and, in light of the Borde–Guth–Vilenkin theorem, which shows that any spacetime with a positive average expansion rate (including inflationary and multiverse-generating models) is past-incomplete and thus admits an ultimate boundary, an impersonal necessary cause would not only have to generate that boundary itself but also, without intention, specify exquisitely precise meta-laws and boundary conditions governing the entire ensemble so that, out of the overwhelmingly many non-life-permitting possibilities, a highly structured, law-like multiverse emerges in which at least one domain is finely tuned for life—an improbability so extreme that it merely relocates, rather than removes, the fine-tuning problem and therefore leaves the Bayesian advantage of a personal over an impersonal necessary being not merely intact but positively reinforced.[86]

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[86] Neither can one deny that current cosmological work strongly suggests that even multiverse proposals do not straightforwardly avoid a beginning. The Borde–Guth–Vilenkin theorem shows that any spacetime with a positive average expansion rate is geodesically past-incomplete, a result that Vilenkin and Mithani explicitly apply to eternal inflation and cyclic cosmologies. More recent work by Kinney, Maity, and Sriramkumar extends this line of reasoning to extended de Sitter spaces and argues that even such speculative constructions remain geodesically incomplete under broad conditions. Taken together, these results indicate that even cutting-edge

But, as it turns out, there is *no empirical evidence* for the multiverse. As the University of Rochester professor of astrophysics Adam Frank candidly states, "Now, I admit, these are very big, very cool, and very exciting ideas. The problem is they are just that: ideas. There is not one single shred of evidence for the existence of any of these Multiverses. Not. One. Single. Shred. But that absence is really just the beginning. When you look at it, the Multiverse appears in these theories mostly as a failure to deal with the real problem that they were originally interested in."[87] University of Cape Town astrophysicist George Ellis has declared the infinite multiverse hypothesis as "unproveable," as involving "much too much untestable speculation about the existence of infinities of entities," and as based upon "ill-defined and untestable probability measures." Ellis adds, "Nothing is wrong with scientifically based philosophical speculation, which is what multiverse proposals are. But we should name it for what it is."[88]

A deeper and *far* more serious problem for the multiverse response emerges when one considers the classical Boltzmann-type objection. Ludwig Boltzmann originally proposed that our low-entropy universe might be a rare fluctuation within a vastly larger equilibrium background. What ultimately undermined his proposal was a straightforward probability argument: if we are simply one random fluctuation among countless possibilities, then it is overwhelmingly more probable that we should find ourselves in a *much smaller* fluctuation—one just large enough to produce the local order we observe—rather than in an enormous, homogeneous, low-entropy cosmos like ours. This same structural problem reappears, with even greater severity, for contemporary many-worlds or multiverse explanations of cosmic fine-tuning.

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multiverse frameworks plausibly retain a past boundary, and thus do not clearly establish a truly infinite past. See Audrey Mithani and Alexander Vilenkin, "Did the Universe Have a Beginning?" *arXiv* (April 20, 2012), arXiv:1204.4658; and William H. Kinney, Suvashis Maity, and L. Sriramkumar, "The Borde-Guth-Vilenkin Theorem in Extended de Sitter Spaces," *Physical Review D* 109 (2024): 043519.

[87] Adam Frank, "There Is No Empirical, Scientific Evidence for the Multiverse," *Big Think*, February 3, 2022. https://bigthink.com/13-8/multiverse-no-evidence

[88] George F. R. Ellis, "Does the Multiverse Really Exist?," Scientific American 305/2 (August 2011): 38–43.

As we've already seen, Roger Penrose has emphasized this point with characteristic precision.[89] He calculated that the probability of the universe's extraordinarily low initial entropy arising by chance alone is roughly **1 in 10^(10^123)**—a number so inconceivably small that it dwarfs even fantastically improbable events. For comparison, Penrose notes that the probability of our solar system forming instantaneously through a random collision of particles is about **1 in 10^(10^60)**, a figure he describes as "utter chicken feed" relative to **10^(10^123)**. The implication is stark: if we are sampling randomly from an ensemble of universes or cosmic domains, it is *vastly* more likely that we would find ourselves in a small, minimal, local pocket of order—perhaps no larger than a planetary system—than in a universe that possesses the kind of large-scale, globally fine-tuned structure we actually observe.

Pursued rigorously, the logic pushes even further. In a randomly ordered ensemble, the most probable "observer" is not one embedded in a vast, law-governed, low-entropy cosmos, but rather a minimal observer arising from the smallest possible fluctuation that can support consciousness. This leads to the well-known "Boltzmann brain" problem: under a sufficiently random multiverse, the most statistically favored outcome is a lone, momentary, self-aware brain surrounded by illusory perceptions of an external world. Consequently, if one endorses a randomly ordered multiverse as an explanation of fine-tuning, one is pushed toward the belief that one's own body, the Earth, the cosmos, and even the text being read are hallucinations generated by thermal noise—a conclusion that is not only psychologically untenable but epistemically self-defeating.

Since no reasonable person accepts that he is a Boltzmann brain, it follows that a **randomly structured** multiverse is extraordinarily improbable. Ironically, the only coherent way to preserve a multiverse while avoiding Boltzmann-brain domination is to posit that the ensemble is *not* random at all—that its laws, initial conditions, and distribution of worlds are intentionally ordered to strongly favor large, law-like, life-permitting universes over minimal fluctuations. In other

[89] Roger Penrose, The Road to Reality (New York: Alfred E. Knopf, 2005), 762–65.

words, the rational multiverse is one whose structure is shaped or constrained by *intelligence*. Without such ordering, the multiverse explanation collapses into radical illusionism.

Thus, far from rescuing the hypothesis of impersonal necessity, the multiverse—once its probabilistic consequences are taken seriously—either reinforces the need for an intelligent ground of order or leads to outcomes too absurd to accept. Under these considerations, the attempt to explain fine-tuning through an impersonal, randomly generated ensemble fails outright.

At this point, one might appeal to a special decay mechanism—such as the proposal advanced by physicist Sean Carroll—in which universes within an infinite ensemble decay so quickly that Boltzmann brains never form, thereby making low-entropy universes statistically typical. Yet this proposal is not only highly contrived, positing decay structures and dynamical laws for which we have no independent evidence beyond their utility in avoiding the Boltzmann-brain problem; it also merely relocates the explanatory burden rather than resolving it. For even granting such a mechanism, one is left with the question: *why* would the world-ensemble be so precisely and improbably fine-tuned as to instantiate exactly the sort of decay law needed to suppress Boltzmann brains? What explains the remarkable coincidence that the ensemble's fundamental dynamics line up perfectly with the specific statistical conditions required to make ordinary observers predominant?

In effect, the fine-tuning problem is simply pushed up a level: instead of asking why a particular universe exhibits improbable initial conditions, we must now ask why the underlying multiverse framework itself is wired—against all default statistical expectation—to generate just the right decay behavior to avoid the very anomaly it was designed to solve. Indeed, the necessary reality that would undergird such an ensemble would have to be remarkably adroit to execute this sort of "double maneuver"—fine-tuning both the ensemble and its decay dynamics in just the right way to circumvent otherwise overwhelming statistical pressures.

Furthermore, one must ask which hypothesis better satisfies **Occam's Razor**: a single intentional cause—one that, notably, offers substantial

explanatory power and unifying scope across a wide range of philosophical and scientific domains—or an unobservable, infinite, highly articulated multiverse equipped with specialized decay laws and contingent parameters deliberately engineered to avoid specific probabilistic anomalies. The comparison is stark: the former posits one principled explanatory ground; the latter multiplies speculative entities, mechanisms, and assumptions well beyond necessity, while lacking independent empirical support.

The force of the fine-tuning bridge lies in its explanatory asymmetry. If N were impersonal, the structure of reality should have been indifferent to order and chaos alike, offering no special reason for the emergence of intelligibility or life. Yet our universe is not merely ordered but ordered in a way precisely compatible with the flourishing of conscious minds capable of grasping the truth of the world around them. That our cosmos is not only structured but intelligible suggests that its source is not brute necessity but a mind—a necessary intelligence whose intentional design accounts for the razor-thin margins of possibility.

Moreover, if the necessary being in question really is an unembodied mind, it is, from an ontological standpoint, a remarkably simple entity. As a non-physical reality, such a mind is not composed of material parts, and its core attributes—self-consciousness, rationality, and volition—are not accidental but essential to what it is. By contrast, the universe is contingent, highly differentiated, and governed by a vast array of finely balanced constants and quantities. A divine mind, in comparison, is strikingly simple.

To be sure, such a mind may entertain extraordinarily complex *thoughts*—it might think, for instance, of the infinitesimal calculus—but the complexity of a mind's ideas must not be confused with the ontological structure of the mind itself. The former may be elaborate; the latter is not. Once this distinction is kept clearly in view, the familiar "Who designed the Designer?" objection loses its force: the proposed ultimate cause is not more complex, in any relevant metaphysical sense, than the reality it is invoked to explain. On the contrary, positing a divine mind behind the universe represents a genuine advance in explanatory and ontological simplicity. And if this mind exists necessarily, as the argument maintains, then it follows that

it is uncaused by anything else and not the sort of reality that could be created at all.

Thus, the fine-tuning of the universe is not a neutral fact but a profoundly probative one. It reinforces the earlier bridges by adding a crucial dimension: personhood entails not only volition, immateriality, and timeless causality, but also the exercise of intelligence. The Necessary Concrete Being is not a blind metaphysical substrate but a Necessary Mind, the rational and purposive source of order, complexity, and life itself. As physicist Paul Davies observed, "The impression of design is overwhelming."[90]

We therefore have five independent bridges to personhood! Accept *just one*, and the personhood inference goes through.

It's important to note that by "personhood" one does not necessarily mean personal interaction with the world or emotional connection, but simply at least some minimal form of consciousness or self-awareness. In effect, a transcendent Mind. We've gone through the full positive case! Now, it is time to address some objections! We'll rigorously tackle 15 in total, plus a final counterargument from an esteemed critic.

[90] Paul Davies, *The Cosmic Blueprint: New Discoveries in Nature's Creative Ability to Order the Universe* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 203.

Objections

Objection 1: "There can be no external cause for the positive state of affairs of the universe's beginning. For that external cause would have to be some prior state of affairs in which the universe does not exist. But that would have to be nothingness, and nothing can't cause anything. So, the positive state of affairs involving the universe's beginning is necessarily uncausable and defeats Premise 1."

Reply: The difficulty with this objection is that it simply assumes what it needs to prove. It presupposes that the universe is all that exists and all that could exist, so that if the universe did not exist there would be nothing at all. But that assumption effectively builds naturalism into the argument—indeed, it assumes that naturalism is true as a matter of metaphysical necessity—without offering any justification for it. Since the possibility that something could exist beyond the universe is precisely what is at issue, the objection merely assumes the falsity of the causal premise rather than demonstrating it. It is therefore question-begging.

Objection 2: "As Bede Rundle has said, although nothing exists necessarily, nevertheless it is necessary that something or other exist. That puts the entire project in doubt."

Reply: Bede Rundle defends the striking thesis that although no being exists necessarily, it is nevertheless metaphysically necessary that something or other contingent exists. In effect, his view denies that there is any necessary being while simultaneously maintaining that an empty world is impossible: every metaphysically possible world must contain at least one contingent entity. A natural way to test the coherence of this claim is to examine how it behaves under the framework of possible-world semantics commonly employed in modal metaphysics. Suppose we consider a possible world W that contains exactly one contingent object—say, a green ball. Because the ball is contingent, its existence is not necessary; there are possible circumstances under which it fails to exist. Now imagine that the ball is destroyed. If its destruction is impossible, then the ball effectively functions as though it were necessary in that world, which undermines the assumption that it is genuinely contingent. If its destruction is

possible, however, then once the ball ceases to exist the world becomes empty unless something else exists or comes into being. Yet Rundle's thesis requires that every possible world contain at least one contingent object. Thus the destruction of the ball would appear to require either that some other contingent entity spontaneously appear or that there be some metaphysical restriction preventing the world from ever becoming empty.

A defender of Rundle might attempt to avoid this difficulty by noting that if an agent within the world destroys the ball, then the world never contained only one contingent entity to begin with: the agent itself would also be contingent. After the ball is destroyed, the agent would remain, and the requirement that "something contingent exists" would still be satisfied. This reply initially appears to block the thought experiment. However, the difficulty reemerges once we consider the possibility that the agent destroys both the ball and itself simultaneously—for example by triggering a device that annihilates everything at once. In that scenario, every contingent entity in the world ceases to exist together. The world therefore becomes empty unless something else exists. Yet Rundle's principle asserts that such a state of affairs is impossible. To avoid that result, one would have to maintain either that some contingent entity *must* arise uncaused at the very moment the previous entities cease to exist, or that the simultaneous annihilation of all contingent entities is metaphysically impossible. The first option posits unexplained generation of contingent reality from *nothing*. The second imposes restrictions on the ways contingent entities may cease to exist, thereby making their persistence partly necessary and thus blurring the distinction between contingency and necessity.

The tension becomes even sharper when framed in terms of modal logic. If it is metaphysically necessary that something contingent exists, then in every possible world there must be at least one contingent entity. But contingent entities, by definition, are such that their non-existence is possible. If *every* contingent entity could fail to exist, then there appears to be no contradiction in supposing that all of them fail to exist together. Indeed, the possibility of total annihilation—that every contingent thing ceases to exist—is prima facie coherent. If that

scenario is possible, then there is at least one possible world in which nothing exists. But if even one empty world is possible, the claim that it is necessary that something contingent exists is false. Conversely, if Rundle insists that an empty world is impossible, then there must be some deeper modal constraint guaranteeing that contingent reality always exists. Yet on his view there is no necessary being or necessary ground capable of accounting for that universal constraint.

This leads to a broader explanatory difficulty. Rundle's thesis entails that contingent entities exist in every possible world despite there being no necessary entity whose nature or causal power explains their universal presence. Their existence across all possible worlds therefore becomes a brute modal *necessity*. But contingent entities, precisely because they are contingent, do not provide within themselves any explanation for why they must appear in every possible world. The hypothesis therefore *requires* that contingent reality be both universally present and entirely unexplained. Consequently, although the thesis is not formally self-contradictory, it faces substantial theoretical pressure: it must either accept *necessarily* unexplained emergence of contingent reality, impose hidden necessities on contingent beings, or treat the universal existence of contingent entities as an unexplained, necessarily primitive feature of modal reality.

Ultimately, to show that a world wholly devoid of contingent concrete things is metaphysically possible—and thus to undermine Rundle's hypothesis—one needs only two very modest premises. Namely:

1. Each contingent thing could, individually, fail to exist (a tautology which follows from what it is to be contingent), and

2. It is not absolutely necessary that whenever one contingent thing fails to exist, another contingent thing *must* spontaneously arise just to replace it.

Together, these claims allow for the coherent possibility that contingent reality might simply fail to exist altogether. As Barbara Vetter explains, "the possibility, for each contingent object, that it does not exist, together with what we might call a principle of independence—that the non-existence of contingent objects can never force another contingent

object into existence—yields the global possibility that none of the actual contingent objects exist" (*Potentiality: From Dispositions to Modality*, p. 275). If the mere nonexistence of a contingent thing were enough to *require* some contingent object in the *actual world* to take its place, then even fictional characters like SpongeBob would generate such a requirement, which is absurd.

Furthermore, if defenders of Rundle's hypothesis are naturalists—as seems overwhelmingly likely—additional implausible consequences follow regarding the status of the laws of nature. As Brian Leftow observes, on a view such as that defended by Graham Oppy, it would follow that "there could not have been other natural laws… [nor] could there have been a different total amount of mass-energy" ("A naturalist cosmological argument," 325). For many philosophers, the claim that the laws of nature and the total quantity of mass-energy could not possibly have been otherwise is a highly implausible restriction on metaphysical possibility.

Objection 3: "The argument is plainly question-begging. The only reason I could believe that an externally caused contingent beginning is even possible is if I already maintain that a necessary being exists."

Reply: The charge that the argument begs the question may initially appear plausible, but it does not withstand careful analysis. An argument is question-begging only if its conclusion is assumed—explicitly or implicitly—within its premises, or if the premises could not reasonably be accepted without already accepting the conclusion. That condition is not met here. None of the premises asserts or presupposes that a necessary concrete thing exists. Rather, the premises advance independently motivated modal claims about the possibility of certain kinds of states of affairs and their causal relations. From those premises the conclusion is derived through valid modal reasoning. Logical entailment of a conclusion from premises is not the same as circularity; an argument can validly entail a conclusion without covertly assuming it.

Second, the premises themselves leave open alternative possibilities that do not involve a necessary being. For instance, they allow for the possibility that the beginning of contingent reality could occur as a

brute, uncaused fact, or that contingent concreta form an infinite regress with no beginning. Many philosophers who reject necessary beings nevertheless accept the coherence of brute contingent facts or infinite regress in other contexts. If such possibilities are admitted even in principle, then the premises clearly do not assume the existence of a necessary being from the outset.

Third, the premises are supported by independent conceptual, modal, and empirical considerations that do not require any prior commitment to the existence of a necessary being. The modal claim that an externally caused contingent beginning is possible arises only after those two premises are assessed and accepted; it is not presupposed in advance. Accepting that possibility requires only the modest judgment that such a scenario is not metaphysically incoherent, *after* the evidence has been evaluated. That judgment can be reached without assuming the existence of any necessary entity and can be motivated by considerations that are accessible to those who initially reject the idea of necessary beings. Consequently, the argument does not presuppose its conclusion but instead seeks to establish it through a sequence of independently motivated premises. For these reasons, the accusation of question-begging fails.

Objection 4: "The argument is dialectically ineffective, because I could easily construct a parody of it using the opposite possibilities. Wouldn't that lead to the conclusion, via S5, that there is no necessary being?"

Reply: The proposed parody does not undermine the argument. To begin with, the conclusion that a necessary concrete thing exists is *compatible* with the possibility that some contingent states of affairs begin without causes. The argument does not claim that a necessary concrete thing *must* causally produce every contingent event or beginning. Accordingly, it remains consistent with the conclusion that there could be possible worlds in which a necessary concrete thing exists while a first contingent beginning occurs without a cause, or while contingent beings exist eternally. Simply imagining such scenarios therefore does not establish that it is possible for there to be no necessary concrete thing. At most, it would show that the existence of a necessary being need not be *causally connected* to every instance of contingency. Since the argument's conclusion concerns the existence

of a necessary concrete thing rather than its causal role in every possible world, these imagined cases do not generate a genuine modal conflict with the conclusion.

For the parody to succeed, it would need a much stronger premise—namely, the claim that *it is possible that no necessary being exists.* From such a premise one might attempt to derive the opposite conclusion by employing modal reasoning in an S5 framework. But that strategy faces a serious difficulty: the premise that it is possible that no necessary being exists requires *independent* justification. Without such support it amounts to little more than an unsupported modal assertion. Moreover, the same form of reasoning could be used to assert the opposite modal premise—that *it is possible that a necessary being exists*—which, together with the S5 principle that if it is possibly necessary that a proposition is true then it is necessary, yields the conclusion that a necessary being exists. Since both conclusions cannot simultaneously be correct, the dispute ultimately turns on which modal premise is better supported by independent argument. The parody therefore does not show that the original argument is dialectically ineffective; rather, it highlights the general point that modal arguments rise or fall with the justification of their possibility premises. As long as the relevant possibility premises in the original argument are independently motivated, the mere construction of a superficially similar parody does not undermine its force.

Objection 5: "As Hume argued, we can conceive of any being's not existing, and so the entire concept of a necessary being is simply incoherent."

Reply: This objection is not persuasive for at least two reasons. First, mere conceivability does not reliably establish metaphysical possibility. It is often easy to imagine scenarios that are not genuinely possible. For instance, one might imagine a world in which no abstract objects exist—no numbers, sets, properties, or propositions—but many philosophers regard the nonexistence of such entities as implausible or even impossible. Likewise, it is easy to imagine a tiger suddenly appearing uncaused out of absolutely nothing, yet most metaphysicians would judge such an event to be metaphysically impossible. These examples illustrate that conceivability, taken by itself, is an unreliable

guide to what is genuinely possible. Moreover, there is a symmetry problem in the objection. If, as David Hume suggests, conceivability is sufficient to establish possibility, then the conceivability of a necessary being would likewise count in favor of its possibility. Within a modal framework such as S5, the possibility that a necessary being exists would entail that such a being exists necessarily. Thus, conceivability alone cannot settle the issue.

Second, the objection overlooks important distinctions emphasized in contemporary modal metaphysics. A proposition need not be a strict logical truth in order to be metaphysically necessary. For example, statements such as "gold has atomic number 79," "water is H_2O," and "whatever has a shape has a size" are widely regarded as metaphysically necessary even though their necessity is not apparent from logic alone. Conversely, a statement can be logically consistent yet metaphysically impossible—for instance, claims such as "the prime minister is a prime number," "this table could have been made of ice," or "Socrates could have been a hippopotamus." These examples illustrate that metaphysical necessity and possibility are more nuanced than simple logical consistency or conceivability. Work in modern modal semantics—especially that associated with Saul Kripke—has clarified these distinctions. Consequently, the fact that the statement "a necessary being does not exist" is not a formal logical contradiction does not show that the existence of a necessary being is metaphysically impossible. The objection therefore fails to demonstrate that the concept of a necessary being is incoherent.

Objection 6: "The weak causal principle actually isn't so weak if Kripke's doctrine of origin essentialism[91] is true. Under origin essentialism, if something actually has no cause, then it could not have had a cause and still remained the very same thing. Conversely, if something *possibly* has a cause, then it must *actually* have a cause—otherwise, it would not truly be identical with itself across possible worlds. Thus, it implies the stronger causal principle, which destroys

[91] Origin essentialism is the view that an object's particular causal history or origin is essential to its identity as an object.

the argument's dialectical effectiveness and brings back the host of old objections to haunt it."

Reply: To begin with, it is important to note that Kripke's doctrine of origin essentialism is not universally accepted in contemporary metaphysics. While many philosophers find it compelling, others have raised substantive concerns about its scope and implications. If those objections are successful, then the present objection loses much of its force, since it relies heavily on the assumption that origin essentialism is correct. Thus, the objection at most targets the argument under the additional assumption that origin essentialism holds; it does not show that the argument fails independently of that controversial doctrine.

Second, even if one grants origin essentialism, the argument can be slightly reformulated in a way that preserves its central insight without collapsing into the stronger causal principle that critics fear. In particular, Premise 1 can be revised as follows:

(1*) For any positive state of affairs S that can begin to obtain, it is at least metaphysically possible that something external causes S, or causes a *duplicate* of S, to obtain.

The key notion here is that of a duplicate. By a duplicate we mean a qualitative twin: more precisely, S_1 is a duplicate of S_2 if and only if they are exactly alike with respect to their intrinsic, non-haecceistic properties. Any difference between them would consist only in their haecceistic properties—that is, properties involving the identity of particular individuals rather than their qualitative features. Thus, duplicates share the same qualitative structure even if they are not numerically identical.

This adjustment allows the argument to remain compatible with origin essentialism. As Alexander Pruss and Joshua Rasmussen explain, "For example, this term 'cat' is (nearly) a duplicate of this 'cat.' … [Moreover, the enhanced version of Premise 1] has an important advantage over (1). The advantage concerns conceivability: for any conceivable event *E*, it seems we can conceive of something just like *E* having a cause. Take a particular volcanic eruption, for instance. When I try to conceive of a cause of the eruption, I bring to mind certain

properties of the eruption. In so doing, I am able to at least conceive of a cause of the same type of eruption. Maybe a particular eruption could lack a cause, and so by Kripke's origin thesis be uncausable. Even still, it may seem perfectly possible for there to be a cause of some other eruption of the same type. So, (1*) could be plausible even to those who may doubt premise (1)."[92]

The rest of the argument then proceeds in essentially the same way. The only additional claim required is that a necessary being is the only kind of entity that could be causally external to a duplicate of the state of affairs consisting in there being contingent things. But this premise is no less plausible than the original claim that no contingent entity can be causally external to the state of affairs of there being contingent concrete things at all. For if there cannot be a contingent entity that is causally external to the existence of contingent things themselves, then there certainly cannot be a contingent entity that is causally external to a duplicate of that state of affairs. After all, a contingent thing cannot exist prior to (without) the existence of contingent things altogether.

Accordingly, even if one accepts origin essentialism, the revised premise (1*) preserves the argument's dialectical strength.[93] It avoids the stronger causal principle that critics worry about while still

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[92] *Necessary Existence*, 167-170

[93] Someone might object to (1*) by suggesting that *kind* essentialism could be true. The idea is that there may be certain kinds of events such that, if any instance of that kind lacks a cause, then *no* instance of that kind could possibly have a cause. If that were correct, then (1*) would be false unless every instance of every kind of event actually has a cause. Even granting kind essentialism, however, the argument can still proceed by adopting a slightly weaker causal principle. To see this, consider that some terms—such as "water" or "an elephant"—are twin-earthable (non-invariant). That is, our intrinsic duplicates on a Twin Earth could use these terms with different referents—for example, referring to XYZ rather than H_2O, or to creatures very similar to elephants but with a different evolutionary history. By contrast, other terms—such as "is necessary" or "a number"—are not twin-earthable. Using this distinction, we can say that two states of affairs are weak duplicates if they differ intrinsically only with respect to haecceitistic properties or properties expressed by twin-earthable terms. We can then weaken the causal principle further: any state of affairs that could possibly have a beginning could also have a weak duplicate that has a cause. Importantly, this adjustment does not threaten the argument. The terms involved in the state of affairs *there being contingent things* are neither haecceitistic nor twin-earthable—"contingent," for example, is not twin-earthable. As a result, the reasoning can be generalized to cover this case as well.

grounding the inference that the ultimate external cause of contingent reality must be necessary rather than contingent.

Objection 7: "We have no experience of fundamental things beginning to exist, and everything we see that is caused is caused by prior materials. Moreover, perhaps our experience of causation, which was formed entirely *within* the universe, cannot apply to the *whole* universe itself. Thus, we have no grounds to think that Premise 2 is even possible, or that it could be caused."

Reply: The objection raises two related concerns: first, that we have no experience of fundamental things beginning to exist, and second, that causal principles derived from experience within the universe may not apply to the universe as a whole. Neither point succeeds in undermining the relevant premise. To begin with, the metaphysical possibility of the premise does not depend on our having direct experience of such beginnings. Many widely discussed cosmological models—including models in which space, time, and matter themselves have a beginning—are taken seriously within contemporary cosmology. Even though we lack direct experience of such an event, the fact that these models are widely regarded as scientifically and conceptually coherent provides at least some reason to think that the idea of a beginning of contingent reality is not metaphysically incoherent. Thus, the absence of direct experiential precedent does not show that the scenario described in Premise (2) is impossible.

The objection also suggests that causal reasoning might not apply to the universe as a whole. But the argument does not require that the *entire* universe begin or that the causal principle be applied universally in that way. Although cosmological considerations were offered as illustrative support, the premise concerns the possibility that a positive state of affairs involving contingent things could begin and be caused by something external to it. One could easily imagine a possible world containing only *one or two* contingent entities that begin to exist and are caused by something outside that state of affairs.[94] The premise

[94] One might worry about the fallacy of composition—the mistake of inferring that because each part of something has a property, the whole must possess that property as well. For example, it would be fallacious to argue that because every part of an elephant is light in weight, the elephant itself must therefore be light in

therefore does not depend on treating the universe itself as the relevant object of causal explanation.

Finally, the objection offers no positive reason for thinking that the beginning of contingent reality (or even the universe) would constitute a special exception to causal explanation. Without independent justification, exempting such cases from causal considerations risks becoming ad hoc—a move sometimes described, following Alexander Pruss, as the "taxicab fallacy," in which a principle is accepted when convenient but abandoned precisely when it threatens a preferred conclusion. Moreover, the argument itself is compatible with the possibility that some fundamental realities might be beginningless or uncausable. For the objection to succeed, one would need to show that the relevant states of affairs involving *contingent* entities are themselves metaphysically fundamental in a way that places them beyond causal explanation. Given that contingent realities are, by definition, capable of failing to exist, that claim is far from obvious.

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weight. However, the fallacy of composition applies only to certain kinds of properties, namely properties that do not appropriately "carry over" from parts to wholes. Some properties are genuinely aggregative and do transfer from the parts to the whole. For instance, if every part of a wall is red, then it is perfectly reasonable to conclude that the wall itself is red. Contingency appears to be this kind of property. If every constituent of some composite object is contingent—that is, each could possibly fail to exist—then the composite object itself is plausibly contingent as well. A house, for example, depends entirely on the existence and arrangement of its constituent parts. If all of those parts could have failed to exist, then the house itself could have failed to exist. Likewise, if every component of a watch is contingent, then the watch as a whole is contingent. Thus, the inference from contingent parts to a contingent whole is not obviously an instance of the fallacy of composition, because contingency is plausibly a property that does extend from constituents to the composite they constitute. Fortunately, however, the argument does not ultimately depend on this kind of aggregative reasoning, should one find it unpersuasive. The central idea is simply that the positive state of affairs itself—namely, there being contingent concrete reality—could be caused if it is capable of beginning to obtain. One need not posit a single contingent Whole to which properties are transferred from parts, if such metaphysical assumptions seem doubtful or obscure. Even if reality consists only of discrete contingent entities forming no genuine totality, the initial obtaining of that positive state of affairs could still fall under Premise (1), provided it is possible for it to begin. In this way, the argument remains deliberately flexible with respect to competing theories of parts and wholes. It does not rest on any rigid mereological framework, but only on the more modest claim that a positive beginning—however metaphysically structured—is at least possibly the sort of thing that could have a cause.

Objection 8: "Maybe the first beginning of contingency is too remarkable or special to be causable at all. Normal beginnings may well be causable, but this particular one is a good candidate for exception. We should doubt this possibility."

Reply: This objection suggests that the first beginning of contingent reality might be so exceptional that it cannot have a cause at all, even if ordinary beginnings can. However, for this proposal to succeed it would need to establish something quite strong—namely, that it is metaphysically *impossible* for the first beginning of contingent reality to have any external cause in any possible world. That is a substantial claim and cannot simply be asserted. If such an exception is to be taken seriously, it requires independent justification explaining why this particular case must be exempt from causal explanation.

Second, there is no apparent contradiction in supposing that contingent concreta could have an external cause. The proposition that "a first contingent beginning could have an external cause in some possible world" does not contain any logical contradiction. Nor does it appear to violate the essential nature of contingent things, since contingent entities are, by definition, capable of failing to exist. In ordinary cases we frequently observe positive states of affairs involving contingent things beginning and being caused—for example, a baby being born, a tree beginning to grow, or a star forming. To rule out the possibility of such causation altogether would require assuming that no non-contingent reality could ever stand in a causal or explanatory relation to contingent things, which would simply presuppose the very conclusion the objection is meant to establish.

Third, there is reason to think that the explanatory character of beginnings does not disappear merely because a beginning is unusually comprehensive. A Beginning of Contingency resembles other beginnings in one key respect: its occurrence naturally prompts *curiosity* about why it occurred. Suppose, for instance, that a shiny purple bubble suddenly appears before your eyes. You would almost certainly wonder how the bubble got there—or at least you *could* entertain that question sincerely. And this curiosity does not depend on the bubble's size, shape, or any other incidental feature; *any* bubble that suddenly comes into existence would provoke the same "why?"

reaction. More generally, whenever the type "being a bubble before me" first becomes exemplified, it is perfectly legitimate to ask why that type has just begun to be instantiated. This intuitive pull toward explanation does not diminish when the type in question has more instances or is more complex. Consider increasingly general properties: *being a bubble, being a constellation of bubbles, being a constellation of contingent foam, being a constellation of contingent concreta, being something*. A beginning of the exemplification of each property resembles the others with respect to the explanatory question: if any of these properties suddenly begins to be exemplified, one may wonder why that exemplification occurred. Of course, the last property on the list—*being something*—cannot have an external cause, since nothing exists outside "all things." But that is entirely consistent with the point: every instance of a beginning, simply in virtue of being a beginning, is apt to elicit a demand for explanation. If no explanation is even possible, then perhaps the supposed beginning is itself impossible. But if the beginning is genuinely possible, then it is reasonable to think that such a beginning is also possibly caused, precisely because it is the sort of thing whose occurrence calls out for an explanation by virtue of its status as a beginning.

Finally, even if someone remains skeptical about the possibility of a caused *beginning* of contingency specifically, the argument can be reformulated in a slightly different but closely related way. Instead of focusing on beginnings, one can focus on positive states of affairs that could have failed to obtain. For example:

1. For any positive state of affairs S that *could fail to obtain,* it is at least metaphysically possible that something external to S causes S to obtain.

2. It is at least possible for the positive state of affairs of there being contingent concrete things *to fail to obtain.*

From these premises the same modal reasoning proceeds as before. This reformulation is not ad hoc. When we recognize that some state of affairs could have failed to obtain—such as the existence of the Eiffel Tower, a particular tree in a yard, the Earth's orbit around the Sun, or even one's present conscious experience—it is entirely natural to ask

why it does obtain rather than not. Each of these cases easily admits the possibility of an external explanation. One might worry about the possibility of an *eternal* contingent thing (whether temporally or timelessly), but the definition of "cause" used is broad enough to accommodate a co-eternal external *grounding* relation, which, although perhaps not as intuitive, is far from incoherent. Moreover, Premise (2) is nearly analytic: by definition, contingent things are entities that exist in some possible worlds but not in others—every contingent thing itself could fail to exist. Accordingly, the state of affairs involving their existence is itself possibly absent.

Objection 9: "On your first bridge to personhood, the necessary being's volition would be just as necessary as itself, so that we're stuck in the same conundrum of a necessary cause being unable to produce a genuinely contingent effect, and no advance is made."

Reply: This objection rests on a subtle but important category mistake—namely, it conflates *a necessary power* with *the necessary exercise of that power*. Grant that the necessary being is *essentially volitional*: its capacity to will is a necessary feature of its nature. It does *not* follow that every act of will is itself necessary. Possessing a power necessarily does not entail exercising that power necessarily. On the contrary, a volitional power is precisely a power whose exercise is *not determined* by prior conditions.

Thus, the being's existence and essential nature remain necessary—it cannot fail to exist, nor can it lack volitional agency—while its *volitional acts* remain contingent. The modal status of the agent does not automatically transfer to the modal status of its actions. This isn't an obscure result. Even in ordinary cases, a person can be necessarily the individual they are while freely producing different contingent outcomes. Whether I choose coffee or tea tomorrow does not alter my essence or identity; it merely reflects which contingent act I freely actualize. The necessity of the agent is perfectly compatible with the contingency of the act.

Accordingly, the objection fails because it treats volition as though it were a deterministic mechanism rather than a genuine source of contingent effects. Once that confusion is removed, no conundrum

remains: a necessary volitional agent can coherently and intelligibly produce contingent effects precisely *in virtue of* being an agent.

Objection 10: "The idea of timeless volition is untenable. When we choose something, we have to learn, choose, and weigh options within time. There is no coherent way of how this could even be described, and so your fourth independent path to personhood fails."

Reply: While timeless volition is certainly alien to us, it is not incoherent. In fact, a timeless act of will can be coherently conceptualized as a single, indivisible "now" in which the Mind simultaneously (i) contemplates the space of possible worlds, (ii) evaluates them against its own reasons or values, and (iii) employs its own agent-causal power to make one of those possibilities concrete. Because the intellect's grasp is instantaneous and non-discursive, no temporal deliberation is required. The possibilities, the preference, and the causal decision all co-inhere in one simple mental state. This act would be logically prior to the universe - its existence would depend on that volition - and yet it would be temporally simultaneous with the very first instant of the cosmos. Freedom is preserved because nothing outside of or earlier than the agent influences its decision, and contingency is preserved because other fully-envisioned possibilities remain merely possible. Thus, genuine rationality, freedom, and asymmetric dependence can all be maintained without any "before-after" within the chooser.[95]

The objection assumes that genuine rational choice requires a temporally extended process in which an agent first gathers information, then deliberates, and finally chooses. But that assumption is not obviously correct. Even in ordinary human cognition, many rational decisions occur without any temporally extended deliberation. For example, a mathematician may grasp the validity of a proof immediately upon seeing it, or a person may instantly recognize that one option is better than another without consciously weighing alternatives step by step. In such cases, the evaluation and decision

[95] The being would thus plausibly be timeless without the effect and in time with the temporal effect. For a more thorough treatment, see William Lane Craig, "Divine Timelessness and Personhood," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 34, no. 2 (1993): 111–132; see especially pp. 115–118.

occur together in a single intellectual act rather than through a sequential process.

If this is possible even for finite human minds operating within time, then it is not incoherent to suppose that a sufficiently powerful intellect could apprehend possibilities, evaluate them, and choose among them in a single unified act. The difference between temporal deliberation and instantaneous choice would then be one of cognitive limitation rather than logical necessity. Human agents often deliberate in time because their knowledge is partial and their reasoning discursive; a mind that apprehends possibilities directly would not require such a process.

Accordingly, the objection fails to demonstrate that timeless volition is incoherent. At most, it shows that human deliberation is typically temporal, which is a fact about our cognitive limitations rather than a universal constraint on all possible forms of rational agency. Once this distinction is recognized, the idea of a timeless act of will becomes conceptually intelligible: the apprehension of possibilities, their evaluation, and the resulting choice can coherently be understood as aspects of a single, unified act of intellect and will.

Objection 11: "No cosmological argument—no matter how modest its ambitions—can be epistemically secure. Such arguments inevitably extrapolate *far* beyond ordinary experience, arrive at conclusions that are in principle unobservable, and commit us to a less unified ontology by positing entities not required for empirical explanation."

Reply: These concerns are understandable, but they implicitly endorse a standard of rational acceptability that is not respected even in the most successful forms of inquiry. Contemporary science routinely posits entities and structures that lie far beyond direct observation—such as quarks, dark matter, spacetime curvature, the inflationary epoch, or the Big Bang singularity—on the basis of indirect evidence, mathematical necessity, and explanatory power. In none of these cases is justification secured by sense experience alone; rather, it arises from disciplined inference constrained by logic and empirical adequacy.

The same pattern appears beyond physics. In studies of biological development, common ancestry and extinct species are inferred rather than observed. In geology, plate tectonics explains continental drift long before it could be directly measured. In mathematics, entire domains—such as higher-dimensional spaces or infinite sets—are accepted solely on the basis of logical coherence and explanatory fruitfulness. Even in everyday historical reasoning, unobservable past causes are rationally affirmed because they best account for present evidence. The move from the observable to the unobservable is not a defect of rational inquiry; it is a hallmark of it.

Cosmological arguments, when properly framed, follow this same inferential strategy. They begin from maximally general features of reality—such as the contingency of the universe or the existence of causal dependence—and ask what must (or what *could*) be true for such features to obtain at all. The appeal to logic here does not abandon experience, but *reflects* on it at a more fundamental level. And the resulting ontology need not be less unified: a single necessary ground of contingent reality may unify and illuminate, rather than fragment, multiple facts about reality. In this respect, a modest cosmological argument operates in continuity with the deepest explanatory practices already endorsed across science, mathematics, and historical reasoning.

Still, one might wonder if there is a surer path with surer links. We can take it a step further. We can make MAB even more secure and modest. Consider this formulation:

1. For any positive state of affairs P, if

(i) P can (at least possibly) begin to obtain

(ii) P is contingent, and

(iii) It is strictly logically coherent for P to have an external cause,

Then it is at least not metaphysically impossible for P to have an external cause.

Notice that clause (iii) of this first premise is *not* question-begging. *Strict logical possibility* is not synonymous with *metaphysical*

possibility, neither does strict logical possibility alone imply metaphysical possibility, as we've seen. Propositions such as *the prime minister is a prime number, this table could have been made of ice, Object x has a shape but no size,* and *water is CO_4* are all metaphysically impossible propositions, despite being strictly logically consistent.

Moreover, this modest causal principle seems quite plausible. If a positive state of affairs can genuinely *begin* to obtain, if it is *contingent* (meaning it could have failed to begin or occur altogether), and if it really is logically coherent for it to have an external cause, then there seems to be no good reason to declare an external cause for it metaphysically *impossible.* To illustrate, imagine that while you are sitting and reading this book, you suddenly hear a loud bang behind you. The sound clearly began to occur (or at least you know it *could*), it is contingent—it did not have to happen—and it is perfectly coherent to suppose that it might have a cause. Perhaps a speaker produced the noise, someone struck the wall, the air conditioner malfunctioned, or your own brain generated the experience through a hallucination. Given these possibilities, it would seem extremely implausible to claim that this bang is the sort of event for which it is metaphysically impossible that it could have any cause at all.

In conjunction with this first premise, we may add:

2. There is a positive state of affairs C, such that C = *there being contingent concrete things*.

(i) C can (at least possibly) begin to obtain

(ii) C is contingent

(iii) It is strictly logically coherent for C to have an external cause.

Clause (i) of this second premise refers to the mere possibility of a Beginning of Contingency which we have been discussing. If, despite all evidence, one still has gnawing doubts surrounding even the bare *possibility* of a Beginning of Contingency, then one could simply remove Clause (i) from the first and second premises, while retaining

the latter two, and the argument can still reasonably go through. Clause (ii) follows almost analytically, by definition of *contingent* (unless one endorses an implausible Rundelian hypothesis). Clause (iii), importantly, is not committing us, by itself, to the *metaphysical* possibility of a necessary concrete thing. It is simply saying that there is no blatant strict *logical* contradiction in the notion of a metaphysically necessary cause, a point widely conceded even by philosophers skeptical of the *metaphysical* possibility of such a being.

From (1) and (2), it follows that

3. It is at least not metaphysically impossible for C to have an external cause.

From (3), it follows that

4. It is at least metaphysically possible for C to have an external cause.

From this, it deductively follows—as we have already seen—that it is possible that there exists a necessary concrete thing. Given the S5 axiom for metaphysical modality, the argument is deductively valid and, once the possibility result is secured, proceeds inexorably to actuality.

Objection 12: "All causation that we observe—or can even coherently conceive of—is fundamentally material and spatiotemporal. Science advances by investigating such concrete relations, not by appealing to vague metaphysical generalizations. Your argument, however, invokes non-spatiotemporal or immaterial causation. That sort of causation is unintelligible, ad hoc, and perhaps even contradictory."

Reply: This objection risks begging the question. It assumes precisely what is at issue—namely, that causation must be exclusively material and spatiotemporal. But unless one already presupposes a broadly naturalistic metaphysics, there is no obvious reason to treat non-material or non-spatiotemporal causal relations as metaphysically impossible. The mere fact that our ordinary scientific investigations focus on material processes does not establish that *all* possible causal relations must be of that kind. Science studies regularities within the

natural world; it does not, by itself, determine the full range of metaphysical possibilities. Thus the objection would only succeed if it could show that immaterial or non-spatiotemporal causation involves a contradiction or violates the essential natures of the things involved. Yet no such contradiction is evident. For instance, the idea that a mind could causally bring about some state of affairs—perhaps by intending or conceiving it—is at least prima facie coherent. Even if one ultimately rejects such causal models, their rational conceivability is sufficient to show that the charge of obvious incoherence has not been established.

Moreover, the objection does not undermine the central argument even if one grants, for the sake of discussion, the intuition that causation *must* be material and spatiotemporal. The argument's core conclusion is the existence of a necessary concrete being, not specifically an immaterial one. If a critic finds the arguments connecting necessity with immateriality (or materiality with contingency) unpersuasive, they can simply interpret the necessary being as material. On that interpretation, the argument would still yield a foundational entity that necessarily exists while grounding or explaining all contingent reality. In other words, the necessary being could be understood as the necessary basis of all *contingent* spatiotemporal or material states of affairs while not itself existing contingently. At worst, we would have to set aside Bridges III and IV, but Bridges I, II, and V remain untouched.

Objection 13: "Suppose it is possible for a Beginning of Contingency to have a cause. According to premise (3), this would imply that it is possible for a necessary concrete being to exist. But that inference is mistaken. Let **B** represent the earliest point at which contingent things begin to exist in our world. Then **B** is a Beginning of Contingency. However, **B** is not *essentially* a Beginning of Contingency, since it could exist in another possible world in which earlier contingent things also exist. In such a world, **B** could be caused by other contingent entities. Thus, it is possible for a Beginning of Contingency to have a contingent cause. If so, no necessary concrete being is required."

Reply: The objection rests on a misunderstanding of what is meant by a Beginning of Contingency. The argument does not refer to a particular

token event like **B**, which happens to mark the earliest contingent entities in our world. Rather, it concerns a general state of affairs of the form *there being Fs*. For example, consider the state of affairs *there being rabbits*. That state of affairs is the same in every possible world in which rabbits exist, even though the particular rabbits may differ from world to world. The general state of affairs is thus distinct from the individual instances that realize it. In the same way, the state of affairs *there being contingent concrete things* is a general condition that can obtain in many worlds, even though the specific contingent objects vary.

Once this distinction is recognized, the objection loses its force. The relevant question is not whether some token beginning **B** could have contingent causes in another world. Rather, the question is whether contingent things could externally and causally explain why there are contingent things *at all*. But this seems impossible. Any contingent entity already presupposes the existence of contingent reality and therefore cannot explain why contingent reality exists in the first place. At most, contingent things could explain the existence of *particular* contingent objects. They cannot explain the more fundamental fact that there are contingent objects rather than none.

In fact, the argument can be formulated without relying on assumptions about the cross-world identity of states of affairs. Instead, it can be expressed using propositions about what could begin to be true:

1. For any positive proposition *p* that could begin to be true, it is possible that something external causally explains why *p* is true.

2. It is possible that the proposition *"there are contingent concrete things"* (as opposed to none) begins to be true.

3. Therefore, it is possible that something external causally explains why it is true that there are contingent concrete things at all.

4. If something external causally explains why there are contingent concrete things at all, then that explanation cannot appeal to contingent things themselves.

5. Therefore, it is possible that there exists a necessary concrete thing that explains the existence of contingent things.

The reasoning behind step (4) is straightforward. Consider the proposition *R*: "there are rabbits." If rabbits begin to exist, then some causal conditions must explain why rabbits exist rather than not. But rabbits themselves cannot explain the fact that rabbits exist in the first place. Any such explanation must refer to something non-rabbit. More generally, no F-things can externally explain why there are F-things at all. By the same logic, contingent things cannot externally explain why there are contingent things. If such an explanation exists, it must appeal to something non-contingent—that is, something necessary.

Thus the objection fails because it focuses on the causal history of a particular event **B**, whereas the argument concerns the deeper explanatory question: what could explain the existence of contingent reality *as such*. When that question is properly framed, a contingent explanation is ruled out, leaving open the possibility of a necessary concrete ground of contingent reality.

Objection 14: "The Modal Argument from Beginnings fails because causation is a false and outdated concept. Causation is nothing more than a product of human psychology and bias, and thus cannot be validly used to reach sweeping metaphysical conclusions. This line of criticism has deep philosophical roots. David Hume famously argued that we never actually perceive any real causal power in the world. As he wrote, 'All events seem entirely loose and separate. One event follows another; but we never can observe any tie between them.' On this view, what we call causation is simply a habit of expectation formed by repeated observation, not a genuine feature of reality. Later philosophers pushed the critique further. Bertrand Russell argued that 'the law of causality… is a relic of a bygone age,' since modern science explains phenomena using mathematical relations rather than causal forces. Contemporary physics often appears to reinforce this conclusion. As theoretical physicist Sean Carroll remarks, 'The laws of physics don't actually talk about causes and effects; they describe patterns in the evolution of systems.' On this picture, the universe is fundamentally described by equations governing how states evolve over time, not by causes producing effects. Indeed, the stronger claim is

that causal language is merely a convenient human shorthand for patterns of correlation within the universe. What really exists are local physical states obeying laws or equations; talk of 'causes' adds nothing to the ontology. If that is correct, then not only is causation unnecessary—it may be conceptually misguided. And if causal relations are not genuine features of reality, then arguments that depend on the possibility of causal explanation—such as the Modal Argument from Beginnings—are built upon a mistaken conceptual framework and therefore fail."

Reply: First, notice that the Modal Argument from Beginnings does not require that causation, defined minimally as "any antecedent or simultaneous condition (or entity) at least partially responsible for some event," be a necessary connection, a primitive feature of reality, or even part of the fundamental vocabulary of physics (as difficult as that denial might be to accept). All that is required is the far weaker claim that causation, so minimally understood, is *metaphysically possible*. Yet the stronger thesis suggested in the objection—that causal relations are not merely unnecessary but metaphysically impossible—is extraordinarily difficult to defend. Indeed, it verges on self-undermining. When one attempts to write a paper arguing against causation, one implicitly assumes that certain processes help bring about certain outcomes: that neural activity in one's brain produces the argument, that one's fingers type the words, and that the argument might *cause* a reader to reflect and reconsider. In practice, rational discourse presupposes intelligible relations of dependence among events. Moreover, large portions of modern science—especially medicine, epidemiology, and biology—are explicitly devoted to identifying and mitigating the *causes* of disease, and these efforts have saved countless lives. If causal relations were genuinely impossible, the conceptual framework underlying such enormously successful practices would collapse, which strongly suggests that the sweeping anti-causal thesis is implausible. Finally, even if we grant that modern physics often describes the world using mathematical equations rather than causal vocabulary, that fact does absolutely nothing to show that it is metaphysically impossible for the concrete realities described by physics to stand in causal relations. At most, it shows that causal language is not always required for the mathematical description of physical systems. But that is a far cry from

showing that causal relations are incoherent or impossible. Even if causation were not the most fundamental or "proper" way to describe reality, it remains a perfectly coherent and intelligible framework—and that alone is sufficient for the Modal Argument from Beginnings, which requires only the *mere possibility* of causal explanation.

Objection 15: "Suppose, for the sake of argument, that your reasoning succeeds and there really is some 'necessary concrete Mind.' So what? Why should anyone care? And who is it supposed to be? Zeus, Jesus, Allah, Odin, or something else entirely? Your argument leaves us completely in the dark. Worse still, if such a being exists and is as powerful as you suggest, its silence is deafening. Where is it? Why does it remain so perpetually hidden from humanity? If the purpose of this argument is to support religion, then it is a spectacular failure. The world we actually inhabit makes belief in any morally admirable cosmic mind look grotesque. Every day we see horrors that cry out for intervention and receive none: children dying slowly from leukemia, families crushed beneath collapsing buildings in earthquakes, civilians tortured and murdered in wars and genocides, infants starving to death in famine-stricken regions, victims trapped for years in brutal human-trafficking networks, or entire communities wiped out by disease and disaster. If there really exists a conscious and immensely powerful being behind reality, then it watches all of this unfold and does nothing. That is not the mark of a wise or loving mind—it is the mark of an indifferent or monstrous one. And the problem runs even deeper. Philosophers such as William Rowe have argued that the world appears to contain vast amounts of *gratuitous* suffering—pain and misery that serve no greater purpose and could easily have been prevented. Likewise, thinkers like J. L. Schellenberg have argued that the pervasive hiddenness of any supposed divine reality is itself evidence against its existence. If a conscious ultimate reality existed and wanted human beings to know it, why would it remain so obscure for so many people across history? Taken together, the horrors of the world and the silence of the heavens strongly suggest that there is no such benevolent or attentive mind behind reality. And if your argument merely establishes the existence of *some* powerful conscious being that permits such things, then at best it establishes the existence of a moral

monster—something not worthy of reverence, worship, or allegiance, but something we would have every reason to disregard."

Reply: This objection is emotionally powerful and raises questions that have occupied philosophers for centuries, particularly the problems of evil and divine hiddenness. Yet even if those concerns were granted their strongest possible form, they would not undermine the conclusion reached by the Modal Argument from Beginnings. The argument does not assume Perfect Being Theology, nor does it claim that the necessary mind it identifies is omnibenevolent, morally perfect, or affiliated with any particular religious tradition. Its conclusion is intentionally modest: that there exists a necessary concrete reality which is at least minimally conscious or intelligent. Questions about that being's moral character, intentions, or identity remain open. Consequently, even if the world contains profound moral and natural evils—or even if certain instances of suffering *appear* gratuitous—those facts would at most challenge specific theological interpretations of the being's character, not its existence. To deny the existence of any conscious necessary reality because the world contains evil would be logically similar to denying the existence of historical figures such as Adolf Hitler or Joseph Stalin simply because their actions were morally horrific. Evil may provoke moral condemnation, but it does not erase existence. Likewise, the mere fact that a being does not reveal itself openly does not entail that it does not exist; hidden agents exist in countless contexts. Existence is *not* contingent on the virtue of the object. Moreover, the objection overlooks an important countervailing consideration. If the ultimate source of reality were wholly malicious or purely indifferent, it is far from obvious why the world would contain goods such as love, friendship, empathy, creativity, generosity, and belonging at all, rather than unrelenting suffering and nothing else. The coexistence of profound evils and genuine goods suggests that the moral character and intentions of the underlying reality are a complex matter that cannot be settled by a single observation. At this stage, the evidence regarding the Being's character is underdetermined. What the Modal Argument from Beginnings establishes is simply that some necessary conscious reality exists; determining its identity, character, and intentions requires further philosophical and historical inquiry. That investigation is precisely the

aim of Part II. For more information on the Problem of Evil specifically, see Part A of the *Subsequent Reflections* section.

Thus, as we've seen, almost all objections are either outright fallacious or implicitly make unfounded assumptions without justification. Moreover, MAB can be intelligently reformulated to accommodate even the most difficult objections.

Graham Oppy, perhaps the most prominent atheist philosopher of religion writing today, has spent much of his career attempting to neutralize theistic arguments, especially cosmological and modal arguments for the existence of God. In response to Alexander Pruss and Joshua Rasmussen's Modal Argument from Beginnings (MAB) and its offshoots, Oppy proposes what looks like a neat inversion. His reasoning is deceptively simple:

1. It is possible for there to be a beginning of the positive state of affairs of there being *none but* contingently existing causal beings.

2. If it is possible for there to be a beginning of the positive state of affairs of there being none but contingently existent causal beings, then it is possible that there is no necessarily existent causal being.

3. (Therefore) There is no necessarily existent causal being.[96]

At first glance, this looks elegant—almost a mirror-image of theistic modal reasoning. But once we look carefully at what Oppy's first premise actually means, *the whole case falls apart.*

First and foremost, what does it mean to say there is "a beginning in which only contingent beings exist"? There are two possible interpretations.

On the **first interpretation**, Oppy is saying merely that at the first moment of some world, all the things that *begin to exist* are contingent beings. But this is entirely compatible with theism. The theist is happy to grant that the first arrivals on the scene are contingent concreta; what they deny is that these contingent beings exhaust what exists. The theist insists that, alongside them, there is also a necessary being who does

[96] Oppy, Graham (2019). Alexander R. Pruss and Joshua L. Rasmussen. Necessary Existence. Journal of Analytic Theology 7 (1):765-771.

not begin. Understood this way, Oppy's premise is harmless. It cannot do the work he needs, because it does not entail that possibly no necessary being exists.

On the **second interpretation**, Oppy's premise must mean that there is a possible world in which *everything that exists is contingent*—that there is no necessary being at all. But this is simply to assert, in different words, the very conclusion Oppy wants to prove: that possibly no necessary being exists. This is question-begging of the most obvious sort. The conclusion is not derived; it is *assumed* from the outset.

This reveals the dilemma at the heart of Oppy's counter-argument. If his first premise is read weakly, it is consistent with theism and leads nowhere. If it is read strongly, it sneaks the denial of theism into the very starting point. Either way, the argument is dialectically inert.

It is important to see that this is not a symmetrical move against theists. The Modal Argument from Beginnings does not assume its conclusion. Pruss and Rasmussen begin with modest, intuitive premises: that contingent beings can have beginnings, and that beginnings can have external causes. From there, they reason carefully to the existence of a necessary being. At no point do they smuggle their conclusion into their premises. By contrast, Oppy's "anti-MAB" only works if his very first step already excludes the possibility of a necessary being. That is not parity—it is circularity. One can genuinely accept Oppy's Premise (1) only if *already* persuaded that a possible world could exist containing *nothing but* contingent causal beings, so that there is no necessary concrete reality—no being existing across all possible worlds. Yet no independent reason is offered for why anyone should accept so weighty a claim *in the first place.*

The problem becomes even clearer if we switch the domain. Imagine someone trying to prove that numbers, as necessarily existent abstract objects, do not exist. They argue:

1. Possibly, there is a world in which *only* concrete things exist.
2. If that is possible, then possibly there are no numbers.
3. Therefore, numbers do not exist.

No philosopher would treat this as a serious argument against Platonism. Why? Because premise (1) already assumes the very point at issue—that there can be a world without numbers. But that is precisely what the Platonist denies, and precisely what the argument is supposed to demonstrate. Unless one can show that numbers as abstracta are incoherent or impossible, the "argument" is nothing more than a restatement of one's conclusion as a premise.

Oppy's reasoning works the same way. To say "possibly, there is a beginning with only contingent beings" in the strong sense is just to say "possibly, there is no necessary being." But that is *exactly* what is under dispute. Unless he can show that a necessary being is impossible—contradictory in the way a square circle is—his argument is dialectically toothless. Oppy might as well have bidden us to imagine a world with five planets and *to simply assume* (without argument) that there is no necessary being.

So, what looks like a neat inversion of theistic modal arguments turns out to be a mirage. Either Oppy's premise is weak and consistent with theism, or it is strong and transparently circular. Either way, it has no bite. The argument, dressed up as a clever parody, is revealed to be nothing more than a rhetorical shortcut. It does not mirror the Modal Argument from Beginnings; it simply declares from the outset what it is supposed to prove.

In fact, it is remarkably difficult to find an argument against the existence of a necessary being that does not fall prey to one of three problems: **(a)** it assumes, without justification, that there is a possible world containing only contingent entities—thus begging the very question at issue; **(b)** it collapses when faced with a parity objection (which MAB is immune to); or **(c)** it simply stipulates from the outset that all concrete entities are contingent, which again presupposes the conclusion it aims to defend.[97] If this is really the best type of

[97] A case in point is the so-called Subtraction Argument, which claims that one can keep "subtracting" concrete entities from a possible world until no concrete entities remain. But the argument faces two major difficulties. First, as Pruss and Rasmussen demonstrate in *Necessary Existence* (pp. 370–376), it falls victim to a parity problem: the very modal principles used to justify subtracting contingent

counterargument a critic can offer, then what does that tell us about MAB?

Assessment

It is crucial to be clear about what the Modal Argument from Beginnings (MAB) both establishes and leaves open. Properly understood, the argument appears to rigorously demonstrate the existence of *at least one necessary concrete being that is conscious*—that is, a transcendent Mind. Moreover, the argument supports the *singularity* of this being rather than a plurality.

This conclusion is secured in two independent ways. First, the very nature of a necessary, transcendent being leaves no room for differentiation. Such a being is timeless, so there can be no distinction of "one before and one after"; spaceless, so there can be no distinction of "one here and one there"; and immaterial, so there can be no distinction of "one made of this and another made of that." In the absence of any possible differentiating principle, numerical plurality

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concreta can, by parity, be used to generate a parallel sequence concerning *explanations* of concreta. Their formulation runs as follows:

Finite 2: Possibly, there is an explanation of there being at least *n* concrete things, for some finite *n*.
Subtraction 2: For any finite number *n*, if there could be an explanation of there being at least *n* concrete things, then there could be an explanation of there being at least *n – 1* concrete things (where *n – 1* is positive).

If the subtraction principle is legitimate in the original argument, then—by parity—it seems equally legitimate in this explanatory version. But that leads to precisely the sort of necessary concrete thing that the defender of the Subtraction Argument does not want, thereby undermining the original reasoning.
Second, and more fundamentally, the Subtraction Argument straightforwardly begs the question. It assumes the principle: *for any non-zero finite number of concrete things that could exist, there could be fewer.* Yet this is exactly what one cannot assume if the existence of a necessary concrete being is even a live possibility. For if such a being is possible, then at some point the downward subtraction must terminate: one eventually arrives at a concrete entity whose nonexistence is impossible, and thus the subtraction cannot be iterated indefinitely. The Subtraction Argument only works if one begs the question by assuming that all concreta must be contingent.

collapses into unity.[98] Second, even if plurality were left open in the abstract, Occam's Razor militates decisively against it. There is no explanatory gain in positing multiple necessary minds when one suffices. MAB therefore coherently arrives at the conclusion of *one* Necessary Mind—nothing more.

At the same time, it is equally important to recognize what MAB does *not* claim. The argument is silent on the moral character, intentions, or historical actions of this Necessary Mind. In one respect, this is a considerable strength. The modal proof goes through cleanly while sidestepping debates about the problem of evil, divine hiddenness, or religious diversity. As such, it is immune by design to objections drawn from those domains. But for many inquirers, this very restraint may feel incomplete. Having arrived at the existence of a Necessary Mind, one naturally wants to ask the deeper and more personal question: *Who is this Mind, really?*

Here, philosophy may have reached its proper limit. Not everything can—or should—be settled by metaphysics alone. It may be appropriate to leave the next stage of inquiry to other disciplines, such as history, theology, or personal experience. Many will be content to let the philosophical argument establish the foundation and then continue the investigation elsewhere.

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[98] One might object that abstract objects, although non-spatiotemporal, are nonetheless richly differentiated—indeed, on Platonism, there are infinitely many of them—and that this shows the preceding argument is insufficient to establish that the Necessary Mind, if it exists, must be unique. However, this objection may be premature. First, abstract objects are differentiated by semantic content (as in the case of propositions) or by formal and quantitative structure (as in the case of numbers or equations), and it is far from clear that such principles of differentiation apply to minds as such. Second, the being in question is not abstract or causally inert, but concrete and causally efficacious. Unlike abstract objects, which neither stand in causal relations nor exercise causal powers, a mind—if it is concrete—must possess causal capacities and be able to enter into causal relations. But causal efficacy plausibly requires a principle of individuation tied to concrete activity or power. In the case of a necessary being whose causal role is fundamental and exhaustive, there is no evident basis for positing multiple numerically distinct instances of such a mind. Absent a differentiating causal role, distinct histories, or limiting conditions, there is nothing to ground a plurality. This marks a decisive disanalogy with abstract objects and provides reason to think that the Necessary Mind does not admit of multiplication in the way abstracta do.

Before closing, however, it is worth taking one final, sober look at MAB from the skeptic's perspective. When all is said and done, there appear to be only *three exhaustive escape routes* available—each carrying a significant theoretical cost:

1. Undermine S5 for metaphysical modality (and thus reject foundational axioms such as K, T, 4, B, or 5).

2. *Clearly prove* that there is some positive state of affairs (that can begin to obtain, is contingent, and that logically admits of a cause) for which it is not only unactual or improbable, but *absolutely metaphysically impossible* for there to be *any* external cause for it in *any* possible world at all, and that not even any conceivable *duplicate* or *weak duplicate* of it could have any cause *whatsoever.*

3. *Clearly prove* that it is absolutely metaphysically impossible for there to be *any* beginning of the positive state of affairs of its being the case that there exist contingent concrete things, in *any* world, OR that it is absolutely metaphysically impossible for the positive state of affairs of there being *contingent* concreta to fail to obtain.

A skeptic might be tempted to seek a fourth route by abandoning standard possible-world semantics altogether—perhaps in favor of an alternative ontology of modality, such as a causal-powers account. But this offers no sanctuary. As Alexander Pruss has demonstrated, the main alternatives to the "Basic Laws of Reality" approach—including causal-powers accounts—very plausibly yield S5 as well.[99] The S5

[99] Alexander R. Pruss. *Actuality, Possibility, and Worlds*. New York: Continuum, 2011 (See Section 2.5). As Pruss and Rasmussen note, "There are many accounts on the table, and our arguments are meant to be neutral in regard to all the best accounts ... We think there are two particularly plausible ways of thinking about metaphysical modality. One approach is that although we should not think of metaphysical necessity as provability in an axiomatizable system, it is plausible to see metaphysical necessities as consequences of "Basic Laws of Reality." Perhaps part of what makes the Basic Laws basic is that they hold in all possible worlds, and so what is necessary (and hence what is possible) cannot vary between worlds (cf. Plantinga 1977, p. 105). The other approach is a causal-powers-based approach on

axiom formalizes the invariance of metaphysical possibility, ensuring that what is genuinely possible cannot also be impossible or inconsistent. Therefore, changing the underlying semantic framework does not rescue the skeptic from the logical force of the argument.

That leaves the skeptic with only three costly options. The first requires rejecting modal axioms that many logicians regard as nearly self-evident, and forcing one to repair the significant collateral damage inflicted on all other modal reasoning. The second and third routes demand sweeping claims of absolute metaphysical impossibility—claims that are extraordinarily difficult to justify and for which no clear argument has been provided.

Crucially, none of these escape routes offers any compensating explanatory benefit. They yield no new insight, unify nothing, and illuminate no further facts about reality. Their sole function is to block the conclusion of MAB.

By contrast, the postulation of a single Necessary Mind offers substantial explanatory payoff. It provides a unified framework for understanding:

1. Why anything exists at all.
2. Why the universe began to exist.
3. Why the universe appears finely tuned for life.
4. Why mathematics so effectively describes the external world.
5. The grounding of moral normativity.
6. The origin and nature of consciousness.
7. The reality of personal experience.

These are not trivial explanatory achievements—and the list is not exhaustive. One could reasonably accept MAB on explanatory grounds

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which a proposition is possible provided either that it is actual, or that something (perhaps a plurality) has the power to make it true (or that something has the power to initiate a chain of causes leading to its being true, and so on)." (From *Necessary Existence,* pp. 36-46)

alone. Indeed, for many, accepting one Necessary Mind will appear to be a lighter theoretical commitment than adopting any of the escape routes, all of which are costly and yield nothing in return.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that rational assent to MAB does not require absolute *certainty* or psychological compulsion. In philosophy, absolute certainty is rare. What rational belief requires is that the premises of a valid argument be more plausibly true than their negations. When that condition is met—as it appears to be in the case of MAB—the conclusion inherits that plausibility. In a deductively valid argument, if each premise is more reasonable to affirm than deny, then the conclusion ought to be accepted. As Pascal observed in another context, the asymmetry of stakes only reinforces this rational posture.

And yet, having arrived at the existence of a Necessary, Conscious Mind, one cannot help but ask the lingering question: *Who is He?* That question lies beyond the reach of pure metaphysics—but not beyond the reach of inquiry altogether. For many, it marks not the end of the journey, but its true beginning. Keep searching. If MAB is even approximately correct, what lies beyond may be deeper, richer, and more beautiful than anything metaphysics alone could have promised.

Appendix

Part A – The Nature of Necessity and Metaphysical Possibility

On Possible Worlds and Modal Semantics

In recent decades, modal logic has often been illuminated by what is called *possible-world semantics*. The basic idea is that a possible world represents a way things might have been — a complete specification of reality in all its details. One may think of such a world as an all-encompassing state of affairs, or as a maximal collection of propositions, each either affirmed or denied, with nothing omitted. To qualify as a possible world, the set of included states of affairs must be internally coherent; that is, they must all be mutually compossible.

A further condition sometimes discussed is that a possible world must be *actualizable*, in the sense of being genuinely realizable. How exactly this is to be understood is disputed. For some, it simply means logical consistency — the absence of contradiction. For others, that criterion is too weak. Plantinga illustrates this point by noting that "The Prime Minister is a prime number" is free of contradiction, yet not something that could genuinely obtain. He prefers to speak of "broad logical possibility," a category that he illustrates but does not rigorously define. This has led many philosophers to distinguish between strict logical possibility, broad logical (or metaphysical) possibility, and actualizability.

In this framework, a proposition is necessary if it holds in every possible world, and possible if it holds in at least one. A necessary falsehood is false in all possible worlds; a contingent proposition is true in some and false in others. Care must also be taken with the scope of necessity. *De dicto* necessity is the necessity of a statement itself being true in every possible world. *De re* necessity, by contrast, concerns an entity's having a property essentially — a feature it possesses in all possible worlds in which that entity exists.

On God as a Necessary Being

The idea that God exists necessarily has deep roots in the history of philosophical theology. Since antiquity, philosophers in the Western tradition have frequently conceived of the ultimate explanatory principle of reality as a being whose existence is not contingent but necessary (*ens necessarium*). In the metaphysics of Aristotle, the unmoved mover is an eternal and ungenerated reality that exists without beginning or end. Aristotle's notion of necessity primarily reflects immunity from generation and corruption: the divine reality neither comes into being nor passes away. Although this conception does not yet articulate necessity in explicitly modal terms, it represents an early attempt to identify a being whose existence is metaphysically secure.

A similar intuition appears in the theological interpretation of the divine name revealed in Exodus 3:14—"I AM THAT I AM." Within the Christian tradition, this declaration has often been understood as expressing divine self-existence or aseity: God's being is not derived from anything else and cannot fail to exist. Nevertheless, the precise modal character of this necessity became clearer only in later philosophical reflection.

During the medieval period, Islamic philosophers such as Al-Farabi and especially Avicenna developed a more rigorous account of divine necessity. Avicenna famously distinguished between necessary existence in itself (*wājib al-wujūd*) and possible existence. A necessary being is one whose nonexistence is impossible and whose essence entails its existence. By contrast, contingent beings require an external cause to explain why they exist rather than not. This framework exerted profound influence on later philosophical theology and shaped the modal structure of arguments for God's existence.

The medieval tradition carried this stronger conception forward. In Anselm of Canterbury's ontological argument, the claim that God is the greatest conceivable being implies that God must possess necessary existence. A being that exists necessarily is greater than one whose existence is contingent, since contingent existence leaves open the

possibility of nonexistence. Accordingly, if God exists at all, God must exist necessarily rather than contingently.

Several independent philosophical considerations have been taken to support this conclusion. First, certain versions of the contingency argument maintain that the existence of contingent reality ultimately requires explanation in terms of a necessary being. As Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz famously asked, *Why is there something rather than nothing?* If all beings were contingent, the totality of reality would appear to lack a sufficient explanation. A necessary being provides a natural terminus to such explanatory regress. Second, some conceptualist accounts of abstract objects appeal to a necessarily existing intellect to ground the existence of propositions, properties, or mathematical entities. Third, certain axiological arguments suggest that objective moral truths require a necessary grounding reality. Taken together, these considerations converge on the idea of a being whose existence is not contingent but necessary.

Despite these motivations, the concept of a necessary being faced significant criticism in early modern philosophy. Following the critiques of David Hume and Immanuel Kant, many philosophers argued that necessity and contingency apply properly only to propositions, not to beings themselves. On this view, propositions may be necessarily or contingently true, but entities cannot meaningfully be described as necessary or contingent. Moreover, it was frequently claimed that existential propositions are always contingent, since the negation of any existential claim appears logically possible. Because the statement “God does not exist” is not formally contradictory, critics concluded that the proposition “God exists” cannot be logically necessary.

These objections, however, lose much of their force once modal notions are analyzed within the framework of possible-world semantics. In contemporary modal logic, a proposition is necessary if and only if it is true in every possible world. Correspondingly, a being exists necessarily if it exists in every possible world. This interpretation, developed in large part through the work of Saul Kripke and Alvin Plantinga, provides a clear and precise sense in which entities may be said to exist necessarily.

Under this account, the claim that God exists necessarily simply means that the proposition *God exists* is true in every possible world. There is no principled reason to suppose that existential propositions cannot possess this modal status. Indeed, many philosophers maintain that certain abstract entities—numbers, sets, properties, and propositions—exist necessarily in *precisely* this sense. If abstract objects can exist in all possible worlds, it would be arbitrary to rule out the possibility that a concrete being might also exist necessarily.

Furthermore, the relevant modality in such discussions is not strict logical necessity but **broad logical (or metaphysical) necessity**. A statement may be logically consistent yet metaphysically impossible. For instance, the claim that "the prime minister is a prime number" is not formally contradictory, but it is clearly metaphysically impossible. Conversely, many propositions are widely regarded as metaphysically necessary despite not being analytic truths. Examples frequently discussed in contemporary philosophy include "Gold has the atomic number 79" and "Whatever has a shape has a size." These examples illustrate that metaphysical necessity extends beyond mere logical tautology.

Consequently, the fact that the negation of the proposition *God exists* is not formally contradictory does not demonstrate that God's existence cannot be *metaphysically* necessary. Similarly, the statement "Nothing exists" is not logically inconsistent, yet many philosophers doubt that it represents a genuine metaphysical possibility. If independent arguments provide reason to believe that a necessary being exists, it would therefore be question-begging to dismiss that conclusion solely on the grounds that the proposition appears logically contingent.

Finally, the suggestion that necessity is merely a linguistic convention is widely regarded as untenable. As Plantinga has argued, such a view conflates **sentences** with **propositions**.[100] Sentences are linguistic entities composed of words, whereas propositions are the informational contents expressed by those sentences. Our linguistic conventions may influence which sentences we employ, but they do not determine

[100] See the remarks of Alvin Plantinga, "Self-Profile," in *Alvin Plantinga*, ed. James E. Tomberlin, and Peter van Inwagen, Profiles 5 (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985), 71-73.

whether the propositions those sentences express are necessary or contingent. Modal facts concern the structure of reality itself, not merely our choices about language.

One way to see the problem with treating necessity as a mere linguistic convention is to consider simple mathematical truths. The proposition expressed by the sentence “2 + 2 = 4” appears necessary regardless of the language in which it is stated. One may express it in English, Arabic, Mandarin, symbolic notation, or not vocalize it at all, yet the truth being conveyed does not become contingent simply because different linguistic conventions are used. By contrast, the sentence itself is obviously contingent: English speakers could have adopted different sounds or symbols to express the same proposition, or perhaps no such English sentence would ever have existed. Thus, the necessity attaches not to the linguistic vehicle, but to the proposition conveyed through it. If necessity were merely conventional, then changing vocabulary or grammar could somehow alter whether the underlying truth holds in all possible worlds, which seems deeply implausible.

A similar point emerges with logical truths. Consider the law of non-contradiction: nothing can both be and not be in the same respect at the same time. Different cultures and languages formulate this principle differently, yet the proposition itself is not created by those formulations. Even if no human language had ever evolved, it would still be impossible for a square to be both entirely square and entirely non-square (e.g., triangular) simultaneously. Our conventions determine how we describe the principle, but not whether reality conforms to it. To confuse the linguistic expression with the modal status of the proposition is akin to confusing a map with the territory it represents.

Scientific examples can also illuminate the distinction. Water is H_2O is often regarded, following Kripke, as a necessary truth discovered empirically. The sentence “Water is H_2O” is contingent as a linguistic entity: English speakers could have used the term “water” differently, or chemistry might have developed alternative terminology. Yet once the referent is fixed, the proposition that water itself is composed of H_2O is not true merely by convention. It reflects a fact about the nature of the substance in reality. We did not legislate this necessity through

language; rather, language attempts to describe a modal structure already present in the world.

The distinction becomes even clearer if we imagine radically different linguistic communities. Suppose one society decides, by convention, to use the word “bachelor” to refer to married men. This changes the meaning of the sentence “All bachelors are unmarried,” but it does not follow that reality itself has changed. What changed was simply which proposition the sentence now expresses. Under the old convention, the sentence expressed a necessary truth; under the new convention, it expresses a falsehood. The modal status belongs to the proposition, not to the sequence of sounds or marks on a page. Otherwise, we would have to say that human beings possess the power to create or abolish necessity merely by redefining words, which collapses the distinction between semantics and metaphysics.

Thus, many contemporary philosophers recognize that modal facts cannot be reduced to linguistic practices alone. Linguistic conventions help determine how propositions are expressed and communicated, but they do not determine whether those propositions are necessarily true, contingently true, or impossible. Necessity concerns how reality genuinely could or could not have been, not merely how human beings happen to speak about it.

For these reasons, the concept of God as a metaphysically necessary being—one that exists in every possible world—remains both coherent and philosophically well motivated within classical theism.

Part B – The Type of Necessity Used, and Temporal Compatibility

In MAB, the key S5 move is *de dicto* in form: it goes from 'possibly, something satisfies N(x) to 'something satisfies N(x).' No step assumes that any particular actual individual exists necessarily. However, the predicate N(x) itself includes *de re* necessary existence (via □E! (x)), so the argument still relies on the general coherence of de re modality (and Pruss & Rasmussen explicitly address transworld-identity worries in their defense of S4/S5). Concretely:

Core modal move (S5)

$\Diamond \Box P \rightarrow \Box P$

If it's possible that necessarily P, then necessarily P.

Existence of a necessary concrete thing

$\exists x\, N(x)$

There exists at least one x, such that x is necessarily existing and concrete (see Part E for derivation).

Moreover, Both the core Modal Argument from Beginnings (MAB) and multiple bridges to personhood can be rendered in a way that is perfectly neutral between an **A-theoretic** (tensed / dynamic) and a **B-theoretic** (tenseless / block-universe) understanding of time. Pruss and Rasmussen do this by defining "*begins to exist*" (or "*a state of affairs begins to obtain*") in purely structural terms that make no reference to a privileged present or to any metaphysical "flow" of time:

*Let S be a positive state of affairs. S **begins** just in case the set of times at which S obtains is non-empty and has a lower bound, but S fails to obtain at all times earlier than that bound.*

- For an **A-theorist**, that lower-bound time is literally the first *present* at which S occurs;
- For a **B-theorist**, it is simply the earliest member in the tenseless ordering of events.

Because the definition is cast in terms of an ordering relation on times (rather than on the passage of time itself), it can be plugged into either ontology without change.

So long as one accepts that *causation* can be asymmetric even if the temporal relation is tenseless (B-theory) or dynamic (A-theory), all bridges go through exactly as stated. Nowhere do they necessarily depend on an objective "present" or a real "becoming."

Thus, adopting either the A- or the B-theory alters none of the premises, modal machinery, or inferential steps of MAB. The argument's force rests on modal and causal principles that are common coin in both temporal metaphysics.

Furthermore, the arguments presented in Part I are most naturally formulated within a framework of **free logic**.[101] Free logic is a family of logical systems that relax the standard classical assumption that every singular term successfully refers to an existing object in the domain of quantification. On the classical view, names and individual constants are typically guaranteed to denote existing objects. Free logic, by contrast, allows for the possibility that some singular terms are non-referring, in the sense that they do not designate any existing object at all. This feature makes free logic especially well-suited for philosophical contexts in which reference may fail, or in which the existential status of purported entities is precisely under dispute.

In order to accommodate this distinction, free logic introduces an explicit existence predicate, commonly written as $E!$. Intuitively, $E!t$ expresses that the term t successfully refers to something that exists. One standard way of regimenting this idea is to connect existence with quantification and identity:

$E!t \leftrightarrow \exists x\,(x = t)$

[101] John Nolt. "Free Logic." In: *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. Edward N. Zalta. 2010. URL: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/logic-free/.

On this approach, a term exists if and only if there is some object identical to it. This provides a uniform way of distinguishing between mere syntactic terms and those that successfully pick out an element of the domain.

This framework allows for a particularly straightforward formulation of modal claims concerning existence. In particular, the claim that an entity *x* exists necessarily can be represented as:

$\Box E!x$

that is, *x* exists in all possible worlds.

Within the same framework, and in the sense in which the term is used in this book, a necessary being may be defined as follows:

NecBeing. An entity *x* is a necessary being if and only if
$\Box E!x \wedge \Diamond \exists y$ (Causes(x, y))

That is, *x* exists in every possible world, and there is at least one possible world in which *x* stands in a causal relation to some entity.

It is important to distinguish the existence predicate *E!x* from the uniqueness quantifier $\exists!x$. The latter is not a predicate but a quantifier meaning "there exists exactly one x such that…". By contrast, *E!x* functions as a predicate of singular terms, indicating whether a given term successfully refers to an existing object. Conflating these notions would obscure the distinction between existence and uniqueness, which play fundamentally different roles in the logical and modal framework employed here.

Finally, it should be emphasized that the use of an existence predicate in free logic should not be confused with the Kantian thesis that existence is not a "real predicate." Kant's claim concerns the content of existence as a property in the analysis of concepts (i.e., that existence does not function as a determining predicate adding a feature to the concept of a thing). Free logic, by contrast, is a formal semantic framework concerned with reference and quantification: the predicate *E!* does not purport to add a descriptive feature to an object, but rather functions to mark whether a term successfully denotes something within the domain. Accordingly, the introduction of *E!* is fully compatible with Kant's point, since it operates at a different level of

logical analysis and serves a distinct technical role within the semantics of the system.

Part C – On Immanuel Kant's Noumenal Epistemology and its Shortcomings

Immanuel Kant's "noumenal epistemology"—the view that we can know nothing about "things-in-themselves" (noumena) and that all our knowledge is limited to "phenomena" as shaped by the structures of our own mind—has been a subject of intense philosophical debate since the eighteenth century. Yet when it comes to modern cosmological arguments (such as those for the existence of God), Kant's radical separation between noumenal and phenomenal reality does little to diminish their force. This is because Kant's epistemology faces serious philosophical and scientific objections, and is rarely taken at face value by contemporary philosophers or scientists.

1. The Self-Defeating Character of Kant's Noumenal Limit

Kant famously asserts that "we cannot know anything about things in themselves" but only about appearances. But this position is, as many philosophers have pointed out, self-defeating. If we truly have no access to the noumenal realm, how can Kant know (or even assert) that it exists at all, or that our concepts—like logic, causality, or even existence—fail to apply there? As Paul Guyer notes, "Kant cannot consistently maintain that we know nothing at all about things in themselves, while at the same time making all sorts of claims about them."[102]This basic contradiction undercuts Kant's distinction at its root. For the purposes of cosmological arguments, then, Kant's restriction simply does not "stick"—for it lacks both coherence and argumentative power. If the existence or nature of the noumenal realm is beyond all possible knowledge, it is not a serious barrier to inference about reality, causality, or explanation as demanded by cosmological reasoning.

2. Empirical Science and Theoretical Entities: A Counterexample

A second, perhaps even more devastating critique comes from the history and practice of contemporary science. Kant posited a sharp limit on human knowledge, claiming that we could never know what lies beyond the veil of our own sensory forms and conceptual structures. Yet the extraordinary success of modern science in postulating,

[102] Paul Guyer, *Kant* (Routledge, 2006), 107–110.

reasoning about, and confirming the existence of entities far removed from direct perception—quarks, black holes, neutrinos, strings, and even the inflationary early universe—shows that reality is not limited by the boundaries of empirical sensation. Scientific realism, the view that science tells us (at least approximately) how the world actually is, is now widely accepted. As philosopher of science Stathis Psillos writes, "the spectacular empirical success of science would be a miracle unless the scientific theories are at least approximately true and the theoretical entities referred to actually exist."[103]In other words, Kant's epistemology fails to account for the actual workings and achievements of science: we do, in fact, learn about the unobservable structures and causes underlying reality, and cosmological arguments operate precisely by employing such reasoning.

3. Kant's Noumenalism Largely Rejected

Finally, it is important to note that Kant's original "noumenal epistemology" is a minority position today. Contemporary epistemology, metaphysics, and philosophy of science rarely accept his radical limitations. While some post-Kantians have adapted his insights, the notion that we cannot know anything about reality-in-itself is, as philosopher Rae Langton notes, "mostly rejected by contemporary philosophy as unnecessarily skeptical and incoherent."[104] Instead, most philosophers accept that our knowledge—while fallible and corrigible—can reach beyond appearances, and the extraordinary reach of scientific inquiry confirms that we are not as locked into our own perceptual and cognitive structures as Kant believed. This further disarms any Kantian objection to the force or legitimacy of modern cosmological arguments, which rest on the very reasoning and empirical practices that have most thoroughly left Kant's epistemic strictures behind.

In summary, Kant's noumenal epistemology is both self-undermining and empirically disconfirmed, and is rarely accepted by philosophers today in anything like its original form. Consequently, it provides little,

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[103] Stathis Psillos, *Scientific Realism: How Science Tracks Truth* (Routledge, 1999), 78.

[104] Rae Langton, *Kantian Humility: Our Ignorance of Things in Themselves* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 7; see also the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Kant's Metaphysics," §8.2.

if any, genuine obstacle to contemporary metaphysical or cosmological argumentation.

But wait! Immanuel Kant also argued that there is no such property as *existence* (cf. Kant and Müller 1907, p. 483). Similarly, there is no such property as necessary existence or contingent existence. Yet, it may be alleged, MAB mistakenly presupposes that contingent existence is a genuine feature of things. Hence, the argument fails.

Contemporary modal logic offers a clear and precise way to address this objection. Within its framework, we can formulate propositions about contingent and necessary beings *without* presupposing that *existence*—or necessary or contingent existence—is itself a property. For example, the statement *"C is contingent"* can be rendered as:
$\neg\Box\exists x(x = C) \wedge \exists x(x = C)$;
and in a free logic, which includes an explicit existence predicate, we can express this as $\neg\Box E!(C)$.

By representing the argument in this logically transparent form, we can set aside debates about whether existence constitutes a real property. Once this distinction is made clear, Kant's objection loses its force, since the reasoning no longer depends on treating existence as a property. In possible world semantics, to say "C is contingent" is simply to say that C is present in some possible worlds, but not others; or, in other words, the existential *proposition* regarding C (i.e., "C exists") is true in some possible worlds but not others. Similarly, to say a thing "N is necessary" is to say that N is present in all possible worlds, or that the existential proposition regarding N (i.e., "N exists") is true in all possible worlds.

Part D – On David Hume's Causal Skepticism and Why it Fails to Affect MAB at All

David Hume's well-known skepticism about causation—that we have no rational or necessary basis for inferring a causal connection between events—has echoed for centuries in philosophy. Hume argued that we never observe causation directly, only "constant conjunction" of events, and thus causation might be nothing more than a habit of thought rather than a real feature of the world. However, there are several decisive reasons to reject this radical skepticism, especially when considering arguments like Pruss and Rasmussen's Modal Argument from Beginnings (MAB), which operates on far more modest grounds than Hume imagined.

1. The MAB and Minimal Causation

First, Pruss and Rasmussen's MAB does not depend on causation being a *necessary* or *always* actual connection. It requires only that causation, defined in the broadest and most minimalist terms—as "any antecedent condition or entity responsible for some event"—is metaphysically possible. In other words, the argument only asks whether, in some possible worlds, there can be causes for beginnings or events. It remains neutral on competing theories of causation (regularity, counterfactual, productive, etc.), intentionally leaving the notion of "cause" open so long as it denotes some antecedent condition or entity responsible for something else. To deny even the *possibility* of such a connection is to adopt an extraordinarily radical view: it would entail that, in every possible world, nothing can ever be responsible for any event—a position that borders on incoherence. To say that all causation is metaphysically impossible is not just radical; it is virtually unintelligible.

2. Scientific and Medical Practice Disconfirm Humean Skepticism

Moreover, that sort of extreme skepticism is empirically disconfirmed by the success of science and, perhaps most dramatically, by the progress of modern medicine. The *entire project* of medicine is to identify, understand, and intervene in the *causes* of disease. The success stories of epidemiology, vaccines, surgery, and genetics are incomprehensible unless causation is at least a coherent and operative concept. The reality of causes and effects is not a mere projection of human psychology, but is vindicated every time a cure is discovered or

an epidemic is controlled. As philosopher Nancy Cartwright observes, "The success of science would be a miracle if the concept of cause were fundamentally incoherent or without grip on the world."[105] It is no accident that causal inference is at the heart of scientific methodology, experimental design, and explanation.

3. The Untenability of Global Causal Skepticism

Finally, to say that *all* causation, even in the minimal sense, is metaphysically impossible, is a position that is not only unsupported but verges on self-refutation. If there are no possible causal connections, then not only is all of science and ordinary life inexplicable, but the very notion of explanation itself collapses. Our language, our thinking, and even Hume's own argument presuppose that antecedent conditions can lead to consequences—even if only in argument or logic! Hume himself explicitly affirmed the objective veracity of a *stronger* causal principle than what is present in MAB. In fact, one can hardly doubt that he would have gladly accepted at least the prima facie plausibility of the weak causal principle that MAB employs. To take the special guise of Humean skepticism to jettison all talk of causation is to misrepresent both reality and Hume's own position. In 1754, he wrote to John Stewart:

"But allow me to tell you, that I never asserted so *absurd* a proposition as that *anything* might arise without a cause. I only maintained, that our certainty of the falsehood of that proposition proceeds neither from intuition nor demonstration; but from another source."[106]

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[105] Nancy Cartwright, *Nature's Capacities and Their Measurement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 1–2.
[106] David Hume, *Letter to John Stewart*, 22 February 1754, in *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 187.

MAB in Symbols

(1)
$\forall x ((P(x) \& \Diamond B(x)) \rightarrow \Diamond EC(x))$

(2)
$\exists x \Diamond (B(x) \& (x = \text{there being contingent concrete things}))$

(3)
$((1) \& (2)) \rightarrow \Diamond \exists x N(x)$

(4)
$\therefore \Diamond \exists x N(x)$

(5)
$\Diamond \exists x N(x) \rightarrow \exists x N(x)$ (S5)

(6)
$\therefore \exists x N(x)$

Predicates:

- **P(x):** "x is a positive state of affairs"
- **B(x):** "x begins to obtain"
- **EC(x):** "something external to x causes x to obtain"
- **N(x):** "x is a necessary being"—i.e., "x necessarily exists and is concrete (causally-capable)"

NecBeing: x is a necessary being iff $\Box E!(x) \& \Diamond \exists y$ Causes(x,y)

Formal Derivation of S5

#	Formula	Justification
1	$\varphi \rightarrow \Box\Diamond\varphi$	Axiom B
2	$(\neg\Box\neg\varphi) \rightarrow \Box\Diamond(\neg\Box\neg\varphi)$	from 1 by substitution $\varphi := \neg\Box\neg\varphi$
3	$\Box\neg\varphi \rightarrow \Box\Box\neg\varphi$	Axiom 4
4	$\neg\Box\Box\neg\varphi \rightarrow \neg\Box\neg\varphi$	from 3 by contraposition (classical PL)
5	$\neg\Box\neg(\neg\Box\neg\varphi) \rightarrow \neg\Box\neg\varphi$	from 4 and the propositional equivalence $\neg\Box\neg(\neg\Box\neg\varphi) \equiv \neg\Box\Box\neg\varphi$
6	$\Diamond(\neg\Box\neg\varphi) \rightarrow \Diamond\varphi$	from 5 by unfolding $\Diamond\xi := \neg\Box\neg\xi$
7	$\Box(\Diamond(\neg\Box\neg\varphi) \rightarrow \Diamond\varphi)$	from 6 by Necessitation
8	$\Box\Diamond(\neg\Box\neg\varphi) \rightarrow \Box\Diamond\varphi$	from 7 and Axiom K $(\Box(p \rightarrow q) \rightarrow (\Box p \rightarrow \Box q))$, by Modus Ponens
9	$(\neg\Box\neg\varphi) \rightarrow \Box\Diamond\varphi$	from 2 and 8, HS
10	$\Diamond\varphi \rightarrow \Box\Diamond\varphi$	from 9 by unfolding $\Diamond\varphi := \neg\Box\neg\varphi$

Equation 10 is exactly axiom 5. A standard result (and one easily formalized with classical equivalences and the $\Box/\Diamond$ definition) is that every modal axiom has a dual obtained by swapping all boxes with diamonds and reversing the implication arrow. Applying that

transformation to Axiom 5 immediately yields $\Diamond\Box P \rightarrow \Box P$ (the dual of 5).

Because the dualization step is carried out by truth-functional manipulations inside the language (negation introduction, double-negation elimination, contrapositive, etc.), it can be reproduced in the Hilbert system using only MP, Nec and the base axioms; hence the resulting formula is a theorem of K + T + 4 + B, i.e. of S5.

Thus, we have formally derived, in Hilbert style and using only K, T, 4, B plus the two standard rules, the sought-after S5 theorem:

$\Diamond\Box P \rightarrow \Box P$ (If P is *possibly necessary*, then it is *necessary*).

All intermediate steps are valid in S5, and no additional axioms beyond K, T, 4, B were required. Additionally, one may perform an independent derivation of the famous S5 theorem via only K, T, and 5.

Here is such a derivation:

System: propositional logic + Modus Ponens; modal axioms **K**, **T**, **5** (only **5** is used).
Abbreviation: $\Diamond A := \neg\Box\neg A$

Goal: $\Diamond\Box P \rightarrow \Box P$

First, consider $\Diamond A \rightarrow \Box\Diamond A \equiv (\neg\Box\neg A) \rightarrow \Box(\neg\Box\neg A)$ (Axiom 5)

Now just **rename the schema variable**: let $B := \neg A$. The displayed instance becomes $\neg\Box B \rightarrow \Box\neg\Box B$.

Thus,

1. $\neg\Box P \rightarrow \Box\neg\Box P$ (Instance of 5. $\neg A := P$.)

2. $(\neg A \rightarrow B) \rightarrow (\neg B \rightarrow A)$
   –Propositional tautology (contraposition schema).

3. $(\neg\Box P \rightarrow \Box\neg\Box P) \rightarrow (\neg\Box\neg\Box P \rightarrow \Box P)$
   — From (2) by uniform substitution $A:=\Box P$, $B:=\Box\neg\Box P$

4. $\neg\Box\neg\Box P \rightarrow \Box P$ (From 1 and 3 by Modus Ponens)

5. $\Diamond\Box P \rightarrow \Box P$ (From (4) by definition $\Diamond\Box P \equiv \neg\Box\neg\Box P$)

QED. (Note: **K** and **T** are not even needed for this derivation.)

Part F – Responding to Objections from Branching Actualism

In recent years, certain philosophers (e.g., Schmid and Malpass) have attempted to sidestep MAB's force by embracing certain alternative views, such as Branching Actualism. It's important to note that *even if* one fully embraces Branching Actualism as the preferred semantics, *even then* Schmid and Malpass' conclusion does not necessarily follow as obviously plausible. If, as they posit, there is an endless infinite regress, then the fundamental necessary truths turn out to basically be infinite disjunctions, which many may find implausible. Consider, for example, Alexander Pruss's detailed analysis:

"In my dissertation, I defended a causal power account of modality on which something is possible just in case either it's actual or something can bring about a causal chain leading to its being actual. I noted at the time that unless there is a necessary first cause, this leads to an odd infinite branching view on which any possible world matches our world exactly once you get far enough back, but nonetheless every individual event is contingent, because if you go back far enough, you get a causal power to generate something else in its place. Rejecting this branching view yields a cosmological argument for a necessary being. To my surprise when I went around giving talks on the account, I found that some atheists were willing to embrace the branching view. And since then Graham Oppy has defended it, and Schmid and Malpass have cleverly used it to attack certain cosmological arguments.

I want to note a curious, and somewhat unappealing, probabilistic feature of the backwards-infinite branching view. While it is essential to the view that it be through-and-through contingentist, assuming classical probabilities can be applied to the setup, then the further back you go on a view like that, the closer it gets to fatalism.

For let S_t be a proposition describing the total state of our world at time t. Let Q_t be the conjunction of S_u for all $u \leq t$: this is the total present and past at t. Here is what I mean by saying that the further back you go, the closer you get to fatalism on the backwards-infinite branching view:

1. $\lim_{t \to -\infty} P(Q_t) = 1.$

I.e., the further back we go, the less randomness there is. In our time, there are many sources of randomness, and as a result the current state of the world is extremely unlikely—it is unlikely that I would be typing this in precisely this way at precisely this time, it is unlikely that the die throws in casinos right now come out as they do, and so on. But as we go back in time, the randomness fades away, and things are more and more likely.

This is not a completely absurd consequence (see Appendix). But it is also a surprising prediction about the past, one that we would not expect in a world with physics similar to ours.

Proof of (1): Let t_n be any decreasing sequence of times going to $-\infty$. Let Q be the infinite disjunction $Q_{t1} \vee Q_{t2} \vee ....$ The backwards-infinite branching view tells us that Q is a necessary truth (because any possible world has Q_t is true for t sufficiently low). Thus, $P(Q) = 1$. But now observe that Q_{t1} implies Q_{t2} implies Q_{t3} and so on. It follows from countable additivity that $\lim_{n\to\infty} P(Q_{tn}) = P(Q) = 1$.

Appendix: Above, I said that the probabilistic thesis is not absurd. Here is a specific model. Imagine a particle that on day $-n$ for $n > 0$ has probability 2^{-n} of moving one meter to the left and probability 2^n of moving one meter to the left, and otherwise it remains still. Suppose all these steps are independent. Then with probability one, there is a time before which the particle did not move (by the Borel-Cantelli lemma). We can coherently suppose that necessarily the particle was at position 0 if you go far enough back, and then the system models backwards-infinite branching. However, note an unappealing aspect of this model: the movement probabilities are time-dependent. The model does not seem to fit our laws of nature which are time-translation symmetric (which is why we have energy conservation by Noether's theorem)."[107]

Since an infinite past, *by definition*, has no initial segment, there is no principled point at which genuinely alternative causal powers could be introduced. On a backwards-infinite Branching Actualist model, the further one regresses, the more the total state of reality converges toward modal fixation, as Pruss's analysis makes explicit. But once causal powers are fully fixed in this way, there is no remaining basis

[107] This is taken from Alexander Pruss's blog, specifically here: https://alexanderpruss.blogspot.com/2023/05/an-observation-about-backwards-infinity.html

for branching into genuinely distinct possibilities without appealing to brute, ungrounded randomness. Why would the causal powers, being so fatalistically fixed for, say, trillions of eons and googolplexes of years, *suddenly,* at some arbitrary point, allow for genuine change? Yet such brute randomness directly undermines Branching Actualism's central motivation—namely, that modality is grounded in actual causal powers rather than stipulative abstractions. Consequently, insofar as Branching Actualism is combined with an infinite past, it either collapses into a quasi-fatalistic picture or abandons its own grounding thesis. Accordingly, it is far from clear that Branching Actualism (when coupled with an infinite past) provides a superior—or even a coherent—alternative framework. Still less does it supply grounds for abandoning a standard Basic Laws approach or for setting aside empirical considerations from cosmology, thermodynamics, or the BGV theorem on the basis of a purely speculative and, quite frankly, ad-hoc proposal. Moreover, the Modal Argument from Beginnings (MAB) can be reformulated so as to *bypass* disputes about "beginnings" altogether, as shown in the response to Objection 8. Furthermore, Alexander Pruss argues in Section 2.2.6.6. of http://alexanderpruss.com/papers/LCA.html that branching actualism leads to a peculiar weak form of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR). On this view, one is faced with the following claim:

(*) The PSR holds in every non-actual possible world *w*.

But the PSR entails the existence of a necessary being. Consequently, branching actualism implies:

(**) Every possible world—except perhaps the actual one—contains a necessary being.

If we also accept S5 modal logic, then it follows that:

(***) Every possible world contains a necessary being.

If we set S5 aside, the result is highly implausible. It would mean that our world alone—among all possible worlds—is the single exceptional case lacking a necessary being. That conclusion is difficult to take seriously. So, in any case, even if we granted Schmid and Malpass' objection to Premise (2) of MAB, it would hardly make a difference; BA, when coupled with S5, plausibly yields a necessary being anyway.

In effect, the objection from Branching Actualism succeeds only if one is prepared to accept *all four* of the following commitments:

1. Acceptance of probabilistic fatalism
2. Willingness to treat the prima facie implications of well-established scientific evidence as epistemically indeterminate in favor of niche metaphysical frameworks (such as Universal Wavefunction Monism)
3. Refusal to allow principled reformulations of MAB's premises[108]
4. Refuting Pruss' PSR argument

At the very least, one could hardly condemn as irrational someone who *does* accept MAB instead of these four consequences.

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[108] Schmid or Malpass might reply that, on a backwards-infinite Branching Actualist model, contingent things necessarily exist, since an infinite past guarantees that there are always contingent entities at every stage of the series. However, this response leaves an important question unanswered: what *explains* the existence of the entire infinite chain of contingent states? An infinite regress may remove the need for a first temporal member, but it does not explain why the regress itself exists at all. It seems, at least on its face, that even an infinite regress that is purely contingent all the way down could fail to exist. One possible answer is that the infinite contingent chain exists because it is eternally grounded or sustained by a necessary reality or principle. If such a necessary ground continuously produces or underwrites the contingent sequence, then the existence of the infinite series is possibly explained without requiring a temporal beginning. Since this scenario is coherent, the reformulation offered in response to Objection 8 could successfully sidestep Branching Actualism concerns about an infinite past while still preserving the possibility for a necessary foundation (Even if one rejects that particular formulation and instead insists that the existence of something contingent is itself absolutely necessary, a further question naturally arises: why is it *necessary*? One possible answer is that the contingent order exists necessarily because, in every possible world, it is produced or sustained by an external (necessary) being. If that scenario is even metaphysically possible, then under S5 modal logic its actuality follows. Importantly, this conclusion cannot be straightforwardly parodied in support of the opposite view. An infinite contingent chain lacking any external cause remains perfectly compatible with the existence of a necessary being that merely "passively" coexists alongside it). As discussed in the response to Objection 2, the Rundelian hypothesis—the claim that although nothing exists necessarily, it is nevertheless necessary that *something or other* contingently exists—faces serious difficulties. Even if defenders of Branching Actualism (BA) could incontrovertibly prove that a framework with past-infinite structure blocks the Modal Argument from Beginnings (MAB), that success would come at a high cost if the framework itself depends on Rundelian-style commitments. In that case, the reliance on such a controversial thesis may function less as a strength of the view and more as a reductio ad absurdum of the framework itself. In other words, if avoiding MAB requires adopting the Rundelian hypothesis, that requirement may count as evidence *against* the BA proposal rather than in its favor.

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Part II – History

I. The Link

"I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness … for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world."
—Jesus of Nazareth, *(John 12:46-47 ESV)*

"That the Son of God had been born of a woman, and crucified, and raised from the dead: this was the claim that would come to transform the world... It was the ultimate inversion of the classical order."

— Tom Holland, *Dominion* (2019)[109]

Part I has argued, through a series of modal and metaphysical considerations, that reality ultimately depends upon a necessary, concrete Mind—an entity whose existence is not contingent but necessary, and which therefore exists in every possible world. If that reasoning is sound, then the deepest explanatory ground of the universe is not impersonal or merely abstract, but intellectual in nature. The ultimate foundation of reality would therefore be something capable of rationality, intentionality, and agency. The arguments of Part I were not intended to establish the identity of this mind, nor to attribute to it any particular theological tradition. Their purpose was more modest but philosophically significant: to show that the structure of reality itself points toward a necessary, concrete, mind-like ground of being.

Yet this conclusion immediately raises a further question. If there truly exists a necessary mind that grounds the existence of all contingent things, might such a mind have disclosed itself within the contingent world it sustains? This question moves the discussion from purely metaphysical considerations to historical inquiry. Philosophy can establish certain structural features of reality—such as the existence of a necessary explanatory ground—but it cannot, by itself, determine whether that ground has acted within history in ways accessible to human investigation. If the ultimate ground of reality is indeed personal or mind-like, however, it is at least conceivable that it might

[109] Holland, Tom. *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*. Basic Books, 2019, p. 16.

intentionally reveal itself to finite agents within the world. The possibility of historical disclosure therefore becomes a legitimate subject of inquiry.

The idea that ultimate reality has revealed itself in history is not peculiar to a single religious tradition. Across the ancient world, numerous civilizations developed religious frameworks in which the divine was believed to interact with humanity.[110] In ancient India, the Vedic tradition articulated a cosmological vision in which the structure of the universe reflected an underlying sacred order. Later philosophical developments within Hindu thought explored the concept of Brahman, the ultimate reality underlying the multiplicity of the world. Some schools interpreted Brahman as a form of universal consciousness, while others emphasized devotional relationships between finite persons and a supreme divine reality.[111] In ancient China, philosophical traditions such as Confucianism and Daoism likewise addressed the relationship between human life and the underlying order of the cosmos.[112] Confucian thinkers often spoke of Heaven (*Tian*) as a moral authority governing the universe, while Daoist philosophy described the *Dao* as the fundamental principle from which all things arise. These traditions typically emphasized harmony with cosmic order rather than specific historical acts of revelation, yet they testify to the widespread human intuition that reality possesses an intelligible and perhaps even purposive foundation.

In the civilizations of the ancient Near East, religious traditions more explicitly portrayed the divine as communicating with humanity through historical events. Mesopotamian religion described divine beings as revealing their will through omens, visions, and prophetic messages. Egyptian religious thought likewise depicted the gods as sustaining cosmic order (*ma'at*) while occasionally intervening in the affairs of kings and nations. In these contexts, divine disclosure was

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[110] See Henri Frankfort et al., *Before Philosophy: The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 129–170.
[111] See Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, eds., *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 37–58; Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 82–107.
[112] See Benjamin I. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 56–89.

often mediated through mythic narratives or ritual practices rather than through clearly identifiable historical claims.[113]

A distinctive development occurs, however, within the religious tradition of ancient Israel.[114] The Hebrew Scriptures present a strikingly different conception of ultimate reality: a single, transcendent God who creates the universe and who acts within the course of history. Unlike many surrounding traditions that portray divine activity primarily through mythic cycles or cosmological symbolism, the biblical narrative describes a sequence of concrete historical events—covenants, prophetic revelations, and national experiences—through which God's purposes are disclosed. In this framework, the divine is not merely the distant architect of the cosmos but a personal agent who engages with human history in intelligible ways.

The arguments developed in Part I lend at least some philosophical support to this monotheistic orientation. If the ultimate ground of reality is a necessary mind, it is unlikely to be one member of a plurality of equally fundamental beings. A multiplicity of independent ultimate realities would generate further explanatory questions concerning their coordination or common origin. The metaphysical considerations explored earlier favor a unified explanatory source rather than a pantheon of independent divine agents, as we've seen. Moreover, a necessary mind capable of grounding contingent reality must possess at least some attributes traditionally associated with classical theism: rationality, causal power, and a form of agency sufficient to account for the intelligible structure of the world. For these reasons, the philosophical conclusions reached in Part I make monotheistic frameworks particularly relevant when considering possible historical disclosures of the ultimate ground of reality.

Of course, one might reasonably object that, even if a transcendent Mind does exist, how could finite human beings ever hope to uncover or deduce its plan? The concern is somewhat analogous to a dog

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[113] See Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 1–23; Jan Assmann, *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt*, trans. David Lorton (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 123–145.

[114] See Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 145–188; John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 17–34.

wandering through a physics laboratory: although the dog may perceive that a great deal of purposeful activity is taking place, it lacks the intellectual capacity to comprehend the principles, intentions, and meanings underlying what it observes. In much the same way, perhaps human beings are simply too limited to grasp the intentions of a transcendent intelligence. Indeed, Albert Einstein, undoubtedly one of the greatest intellects of all time, expressed a similar sentiment when asked in an interview whether he believed in God. He replied:

"Your question is the most difficult in the world. It is not a question I can answer simply with yes or no. I am not an Atheist. I do not know if I can define myself as a Pantheist. The problem involved is too vast for our limited minds. May I not reply with a parable? The human mind, no matter how highly trained, cannot grasp the universe. We are in the position of a little child, entering a huge library whose walls are covered to the ceiling with books in many different tongues. The child knows that someone must have written those books. It does not know who or how. It does not understand the languages in which they are written. The child notes a definite Plan in the arrangement of the books, a mysterious Order, which it does not comprehend, but only dimly suspects. That, it seems to me, is the attitude of the human mind, even the greatest and most cultured, toward God. We see a universe marvelously arranged, obeying certain laws, but we understand the laws only dimly. Our limited minds cannot grasp the mysterious force that sways the constellations."[115]

Einstein keenly recognizes the existence of some kind of Universal Plan or transcendent order. From the fine-tuning of the universe and the remarkable order exhibited in the laws of nature, he infers that reality is not chaotic or accidental. Yet he simultaneously denies that human beings can attain genuine knowledge of the ultimate source or meaning behind that order. Perhaps he is right. Yet one may still ask whether his conclusion necessarily follows from his premises. After all, as Gavin Ortlund observes in response to Einstein's parable:

[115] Albert Einstein, interview by George Sylvester Viereck, "What Life Means to Einstein," *The Saturday Evening Post*, October 26, 1929, 117.

"The One who wrote the books is still around, right? In other words, there is a *Librarian*. If this Person was capable of writing the books, they're also, presumably, capable of talking. Einstein says that 'The child knows that someone *must* have written those books.' If that's really true, why couldn't the same Person speak again? Why *couldn't* he show up in other ways?"[116]

In other words, even if human reason alone is insufficient to fully decipher the Universal Plan, it does not follow that the Author of reality is incapable of revealing Himself. The very existence of a rational order may leave open not only the possibility of a Designer, but also the possibility of revelation. If such a mind exists and is capable of intentional action, the possibility arises that it might reveal itself within the historical world. Yet claims of divine revelation must be evaluated with appropriate intellectual caution. History contains many religious claims, and not all can be true simultaneously in their strongest forms. The task, therefore, is not to accept any such claim uncritically but to examine them using the same standards employed in historical investigation more generally. Questions concerning the reliability of sources, the temporal proximity of testimony to events, the explanatory adequacy of competing hypotheses, and the coherence of the proposed explanation with broader metaphysical considerations all become relevant. If a genuine instance of divine disclosure occurred within history, one would expect it to leave traces accessible to historical inquiry.

Of course, many laypersons and scholars alike initially approach religious claims with serious skepticism. In much of the modern West, religious belief is frequently regarded not merely with caution, but with a deep hermeneutic of suspicion: the assumption that, however compelling a religious claim may first appear, it is ultimately likely to be illusory, psychologically motivated, socially constructed, or historically misguided. Modern intellectual culture has been profoundly shaped by thinkers such as Karl Marx, who famously described religion as "the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world … the opium of the people." Others, such as Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche, likewise interpreted religion primarily through the lenses of psychological need, power, social control, or existential anxiety. Such critiques have deeply influenced contemporary intellectual sensibilities

[116] To see a fuller exposition of the subject, visit: https://youtu.be/D2zba83l2T0?si=YseSh_i67afCn2vw.

and continue to shape how religious claims are evaluated in many academic and cultural contexts.

Yet this skepticism, while understandable and often intellectually serious, must itself be carefully examined. It is certainly true that many — perhaps even most — religious claims throughout history are false, weakly evidenced, internally incoherent, or culturally conditioned. Human beings are susceptible to superstition, error, manipulation, and wish-fulfillment, and religion is no exception. But from the proposition:

A. Many religious claims are false or poorly evidenced,

it does not follow that:

A`. Therefore, any claim that is religious in nature is necessarily false simply by virtue of being religious.

Such a conclusion would not be skepticism properly speaking, but a form of prejudgment. It would amount to dismissing a category of claims prior to investigation, rather than evaluating particular claims on their individual historical and evidential merits.

Moreover, the modern Western skeptical posture is itself historically situated rather than philosophically inevitable. It emerged out of specific intellectual developments: the Enlightenment reaction against ecclesiastical authority, the rise of scientific naturalism, the religious conflicts of Europe, and later critiques offered by Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, and others. In this sense, contemporary secular skepticism is not a neutral default position floating above history, but a particular intellectual inheritance shaped by the cultural trajectory of the modern West.

At the same time, skepticism toward religion is by no means uniquely Western, nor should non-Western traditions be caricatured as uniformly credulous or uncritical. Within many Eastern traditions, for example, religious claims are often approached less through rigid dogmatic assertion and more through contemplative practice, philosophical analysis, or experiential verification. Certain schools within Buddhist philosophy have historically expressed skepticism toward metaphysical speculation itself, emphasizing disciplined inquiry into consciousness and human suffering rather than unquestioning belief. Likewise, in

parts of the modern Middle East, skepticism toward particular religious institutions or theological interpretations has emerged from political history, colonial pressures, internal reform movements, and debates concerning modernity and authority. Even within deeply religious societies, one often finds sophisticated traditions of critique, reinterpretation, and theological self-examination.[117]

Accordingly, the mere existence of widespread skepticism — whether Western, Eastern, or Middle Eastern — cannot by itself determine the truth or falsity of a religious claim. Skepticism may function as a valuable intellectual safeguard against gullibility and dogmatism, but it can also harden into an unwarranted methodological exclusion of transcendent explanations before evidence is even considered.

If the arguments developed in Part I are sound, however, then the strictly naturalistic framework that often underlies modern skepticism becomes considerably less secure. For if reality is not exhausted by the material contingent order, and if philosophical naturalism fails as a comprehensive explanatory framework, then the automatic dismissal of miraculous or supernatural claims can no longer be justified *a priori*. The question would no longer be whether miracles are impossible in principle, but whether particular historical claims are supported by sufficient evidence.

Among the many religious traditions that claim divine revelation, one event stands out as an especially well-defined historical claim: the assertion that Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead. The earliest Christian movement placed this claim at the very center of its message. According to the earliest surviving Christian texts, the resurrection of Jesus was not presented merely as a symbolic myth or spiritual metaphor, but as a concrete event in space and time. This distinction is not merely a matter of theological preference; it is a historical concession recognized even by some scholars historically hostile to the faith. As Antony Flew, one of the most formidable former atheist philosophers of the twentieth century, observed:

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[117] See Jay L. Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism: Why It Matters to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007); Wael B. Hallaq, *The Impossible State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962); and Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

"The evidence for the resurrection is better than for claimed miracles in any other religion. It's outstandingly different in quality and quantity... From what I know, there is no evidence in any other religion that is equally strong."[118]

Several considerations make this claim a particularly suitable starting point for historical investigation. First, Jesus of Nazareth is widely recognized by historians as a historical figure who lived in first-century Roman Judea and was executed by crucifixion under the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate. The claim of his resurrection therefore concerns a specific individual situated within a well-documented historical context. Second, the earliest testimonies concerning the resurrection appear remarkably early. Certain creedal formulations preserved in the letters of Paul are commonly dated by scholars to within a few years of the events they describe. Such proximity to the events significantly reduces the likelihood that the belief arose only through a long process of legendary development.

A further question concerns the rapid emergence and expansion of the early Christian movement. Within a short time after Jesus' death, his followers began proclaiming that he had been raised from the dead and exalted as Lord. This proclamation spread rapidly across the Mediterranean world despite social opposition and occasional persecution. The historian is therefore confronted with a phenomenon that requires explanation: the sudden appearance of a movement centered upon the conviction that a crucified teacher had been vindicated by divine action.

Finally, the resurrection claim fits naturally within the philosophical framework established in Part I. If the ultimate ground of reality is a necessary, personal mind capable of intentional agency, then the possibility that such a mind might act within history *cannot* be dismissed as metaphysically impossible. Rather, such action becomes a candidate explanation for certain historical events, provided the historical evidence warrants it. The philosophical argument for a necessary mind does not by itself establish the truth of the resurrection claim, but it removes a significant barrier that might otherwise exclude such events from consideration.

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[118] Flew, Antony, and Gary Habermas. "My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism: An Exclusive Interview with Former British Atheist Professor Antony Flew." *Philosophia Christi*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2004, p. 209.

The inquiry that follows therefore proceeds from metaphysical reflection to historical investigation. The arguments of Part I sought to identify the ultimate explanatory ground of reality. Part II turns to the question of whether that ground has disclosed itself within the historical world. Among the various candidates for such disclosure, the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth presents a particularly clear and historically accessible claim—one that invites careful examination using the tools of historical reasoning. The task ahead is to evaluate the available evidence with intellectual honesty and philosophical clarity, asking whether the historical record bears credible witness to an event through which the necessary mind that grounds reality has made itself known within the fabric of history.

For what Part I argued on the plane of metaphysics—that reality is grounded in a Necessary Mind capable of causation—the resurrection would demonstrate in time and space. It would mean that the Necessary Being has not remained hidden in abstraction, but has stepped forward into history, clothed in flesh, to speak and act in our midst. The metaphysical Absolute, once only glimpsed in logic and necessity, would have shown its face, its character, its intentions, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. What philosophy can only whisper about—an eternal mind behind contingency—the resurrection would shout from an empty tomb: *this is who God is.*

And what would such a revelation mean? It would mean that the ground of reality is not an indifferent force, nor an impersonal abstraction, but a personal agent who acts in love. It would mean that the moral call upon humanity is not arbitrary, but rooted in the very heart of reality itself. It would mean that existence is not absurd, but has a purpose, a telos, a destiny. In Christ, the Necessary Mind would not only explain why there is something rather than nothing—it would declare why there is hope rather than despair, redemption rather than futility.

If the resurrection is true, then Christ is not merely another prophet or moral teacher. He is not merely one among many religious voices in the marketplace of spiritual ideas. He is *the Avatar*—not in the Eastern sense of a temporary divine manifestation, but in the radical sense that God Himself, the very Necessary Mind who sustains all things, has crossed the infinite divide to rescue His creation. And to rescue us from what? A malevolent villain threatening to harm us from the outside, as is often portrayed? No. From our *own* evil. From the evil we find within *ourselves*. And not only that, but to save us from death itself,

and to grant us "eternal life"—a genuine, continued conscious existence that never will fade, but, like God, will live forever. For Jesus, *that* is what it means to save the world. It is not merely a question for historians. It is the question upon which hangs the meaning of existence itself.

The claim that Jesus of Nazareth rose bodily from the dead stands at the crossroads of history and faith. To assess it responsibly, one must take account of how scholars have studied the New Testament over the centuries. The history of biblical criticism is itself a story of shifting assumptions, evolving methods, and debates over what can be known of Jesus and the early Christian movement.

For the first fifteen centuries of Christianity, the New Testament was largely received within the Church as divinely inspired testimony. The focus of theologians such as Augustine, Aquinas, and the Reformers was not on *whether* the text was historically reliable, but on how to interpret it faithfully. Questions of historical method, literary form, and authorship were subordinated to the conviction that Scripture bore authoritative witness to God's revelation in Christ. Even during the Reformation, when figures like Martin Luther emphasized the primacy of Scripture over Church tradition, the New Testament was read primarily through theological rather than critical-historical lenses. The reliability of the Gospels was assumed, and disputes centered more on doctrine than on historicity.

The Enlightenment brought a radical shift. As rationalism and empiricism challenged traditional authorities, scholars began to scrutinize the Bible with the same critical tools used for classical texts. Baruch Spinoza questioned Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, setting a precedent for source criticism. Deists such as Thomas Jefferson treated miraculous elements as mythological accretions, preserving only Jesus' ethical teaching. In the eighteenth century, the "quest for the historical Jesus" was born. Hermann Samuel Reimarus argued that the disciples fabricated the resurrection to perpetuate Jesus' movement, a thesis published posthumously and scandalizing Europe. He concluded:

"(l) the guard story is very doubtful and unconfirmed, and it is very probable the disciples came by night, stole the corpse, and said afterward Jesus had arisen; (2) the disciples' testimony is both inconsistent and contradictory; and (3) the prophecies

appealed to are irrelevant, falsely interpreted, and question-begging."[119]

Thus, in Reimarus' eyes, Christianity should simply be dismissed as a deliberate fraud. In addition to this, other rationalist interpreters sought natural explanations for miracles, while others, such as David Hume, declared them philosophically impossible. Hume concluded that miracles can never be the foundation for any system of religion. "Our most holy religion is founded on *Faith*, not on reason," pontificates Hume, all the while laughing up his sleeve:

"The Christian Religion not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: And whoever is moved by *Faith* to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience."[120]

In other words, it is a miracle that anyone could be stupid enough to believe in Christianity! Thus, the very possibility of resurrection was placed under suspicion, and historical criticism became the dominant mode of academic inquiry.

The nineteenth century saw an explosion of historical-critical studies, particularly in Germany. Scholars like David Friedrich Strauss argued that the Gospels were mythological expressions of early Christian faith, not historical accounts. Strauss' *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1835) was groundbreaking, proposing that miraculous narratives arose through myth-making rather than eyewitness reporting. He wrote:

"In the view of the church, Jesus was miraculously revived; according to the deistic view of Reimarus, his corpse was stolen by the disciples; in the rationalistic view, he only appeared to be dead and revived; according to our view the imagination of his followers aroused in their deepest spirit, presented their Master

[119] Hermann Samuel Reimarus, Fragments, trans. R. S. Fraser, ed. C. H. Talbert, Lives of Jesus Series (London: SCM, 1971), 104.
[120] David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*,10.2.101.

revived, for they could not possibly think of him as dead. What for a long time was valid as an external fact, first miraculous, then deceptive, finally simply natural, is hereby reduced completely to the state of mind and made into an inner event."[121]

Strauss thus denied that there was any external fact to be explained, thereby reducing any and all purported experiences of Christ into mere sociopsychological hallucinations. Moreover, the Gospels were assumed to be nothing more than dubious legends colored by myth.

Meanwhile, the Tübingen School, under Ferdinand Christian Baur, interpreted the New Testament in terms of Hegelian dialectic, viewing it as a record of conflicts between Jewish Christianity (Peter) and Gentile Christianity (Paul). Liberal theologians such as Adolf von Harnack emphasized the ethical kernel of Christianity, stripping away its miraculous shell. By the end of the century, confidence was high that critical methods could reconstruct the "real Jesus," distinct from the "Christ of faith." Yet, as Albert Schweitzer's 1906 *Quest of the Historical Jesus* showed, such reconstructions often reflected the biases of their authors more than the realities of first-century Judea. Schweitzer concluded that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet whose radical message had been misunderstood by modern rationalists.

The twentieth century opened with deep skepticism. Rudolf Bultmann, the great existentialist theologian, argued that almost *nothing* could be known of the historical Jesus, and that faith must rest on existential encounter rather than historical fact. He called for "demythologizing" the New Testament, reinterpreting its mythical language in existential categories. In 1985, a prominent New Testament scholar named Robert Funk founded a think tank in Southern California which he called the Jesus Seminar. The ostensible purpose of the Seminar was to allegedly uncover the "real" historical person of Jesus of Nazareth using the best methods of scientific, biblical criticism. In Funk's view the historical Jesus has been overlaid by Christian legend, myth, and metaphysics and thus scarcely resembled the Christ figure presented in the Gospels and worshiped by the church today. The goal of the Seminar was to

[121] David Friedrich Strauss, "Herrmann Samuel Reimarus and His 'Apology,'" in Fragments, 280–81.

strip away these layers and to recover the "authentic" Jesus who really lived and taught. In his own words:

"The contemporary religious controversy turns on whether the worldview reflected in the Bible can be carried forward into this scientific age and retained as an article of faith. . . . the Christ of creed and dogma . . . can no longer command the assent of those who have seen the heavens through Galileo's telescope."[122]

Yet, such radical skepticism provoked reactions. Bultmann's own students, known as the "New Quest" scholars, insisted that something *could* indeed be recovered of Jesus' life and message. Archaeological discoveries, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi texts, deepened historical understanding of Judaism and early Christianity, challenging simplistic reconstructions. Soon, the critical consensus of professional historians began to shift. Scholars such as Joachim Jeremias and C.H. Dodd argued for the plausibility of Jesus' parables, teachings, and eschatological outlook. In the latter part of the century, a "Third Quest" for the historical Jesus emerged, emphasizing Jesus' Jewish context and situating him within first-century apocalyptic Judaism, with figures such as E.P. Sanders and Geza Vermes leading the way. This quest rejected both the skeptical extremes of Bultmann and the rationalist reconstructions of the nineteenth century, instead highlighting Jesus as a credible figure in history.

Today, New Testament studies are more diverse than ever. Postmodern approaches emphasize the literary, sociological, and cultural dimensions of the texts, often wary of sweeping claims to objectivity. Meanwhile, traditional historical-critical tools remain in use, but now supplemented by interdisciplinary methods: archaeology, social-scientific criticism, memory studies, and oral tradition analysis. Most significantly for the resurrection, a surprising degree of consensus has emerged on certain core facts about Jesus' death and the origins of Christianity. While scholars disagree on explanations, even skeptical historians generally concede that Jesus was crucified, that his disciples sincerely believed he had risen, that the tomb was reported empty, and that the early Christian movement exploded rapidly on this basis. This has given rise to what apologists call the "Minimal Facts" approach,

[122] R. W. Funk, R. W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, "Introduction" to *The Five Gospels* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 2.

pioneered by scholars like Gary Habermas, Michael Licona, and William Lane Craig.

Bart Ehrman—a rigorously critical modern historian who consistently underscores the role of methodological naturalism in historical investigation—nevertheless acknowledges strikingly strong historical foundations for several key events surrounding Jesus' death. Regarding Jesus' burial and the discovery of the empty tomb, Ehrman observes that "the earliest accounts we have are unanimous in saying that Jesus was in fact buried by this fellow, Joseph of Arimathea, and so it's relatively reliable that that's what happened. We also have solid traditions to indicate that women found this tomb empty three days later."[123] Concerning the post-mortem appearances, he concurs with virtually all scholars that "we can say with some confidence that some of his disciples claimed to have seen Jesus alive."[124] Moreover, Ehrman himself acknowledges that if Jesus had simply died and no one had genuinely believed he rose, the Christian movement would never have arisen at all—thereby affirming the fact of its sudden and unprecedented origin.[125] Hence, even Ehrman—despite his pronounced skepticism—implicitly grants that the historian can legitimately complete an evidence-based historical argument for extracting at least some true facts surrounding the resurrection of Jesus. As we shall soon see, those facts are practically all that are needed for such a case to be able to go through successfully.

Thus, the story of New Testament criticism is not one of simple decline from faith to skepticism, nor of linear progress toward certainty. It is a dialectic of doubt and rediscovery, skepticism and renewal. What has changed most is not the stubborn facts of history, but the philosophical lenses through which scholars have viewed them. Where some have seen myth, others have seen memory; where some have found delusion, others have discerned truth.

Before turning directly to the question of Jesus' resurrection, it may be helpful to clarify the methodological posture of this chapter. Contemporary scholarship rightly includes a wide range of perspectives on the historical origins of ancient Israel, the development of Jewish identity, and the theological self-understanding reflected in the Hebrew

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[123] Bart Ehrman, "From Jesus to Constantine: A History of Early Christianity," Lecture 4: "Oral and Written Traditions about Jesus" (The Teaching Company, 2003).
[124] Ehrman, *Jesus*, 200.
[125] Ehrman, *New Testament,* 276.

Scriptures. Many scholars approach these questions with understandable caution, particularly in light of the long and complex processes of oral transmission, redaction, and reinterpretation that appear to have shaped much of the Old Testament material. For example, some scholars of Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) cultures interpret Israel as emerging almost completely from surrounding Canaanite culture, and therefore view claims of divine election or covenantal uniqueness as later ideological constructions or deliberate fabrications rather than historical realities. As the eminent archaeologist William G. Dever observes, summarizing this critical posture:

"The Bible is not history; it doesn't pretend to be. It is literature, and a peculiar brand of theological literature at that. It is a reconstruction of the past after the past was essentially over... The biblical writers are not telling it the way it was, but the way it would have been had they been in charge. And that obviously gives us a rather skewed view of Israel's past.... The biblical account of Israel's origins is also a construct.... [The early Israelites] emerged in some way out of Late Bronze Age urban Canaanite society."[126]

Today, many scholars within the field of the Ancient Near East (ANE) contend that early Israelite religion emerged gradually out of the broader religious, literary, and political environment of the ancient Levant. On this view, Israelite theology did not arise in complete isolation, but developed through a long process of interaction with surrounding Canaanite, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Northwest Semitic traditions. Experts in ANE Studies and comparative biblical literature often argue that ancient Israelite religion developed gradually from earlier polytheistic (belief in many gods), henotheistic (devotion to one chief god while acknowledging others), and monolatrous (worship of one god without denying the existence of others) tendencies into later monotheism (belief that only one true God exists). These scholars point to parallels between early Israelite texts and surrounding Semitic traditions, particularly the Ugaritic texts, including possible shared imagery, titles, and themes associated with deities such as Baal and El.[127] Numerous scholars therefore interpret biblical

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[126] Dever, William G. "How to Tell a Canaanite from an Israelite." *The Rise of Ancient Israel*, edited by Hershel Shanks, Biblical Archaeology Society, 1992, pp. 27-28, 50.
[127] See Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1–32; also, by the same author, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 7–38.

concepts—such as divine kingship, covenantal structures, temple symbolism, cosmology, law codes, angelology, and even aspects of monotheism itself—as historically conditioned adaptations or transformations of earlier regional motifs.

From a strictly secular perspective, the Hebrew Bible is often treated primarily as a composite cultural artifact: a body of literature shaped by competing priestly, monarchic, exilic, and post-exilic communities seeking to construct social cohesion, political legitimacy, ethnic identity, and theological continuity amid changing historical circumstances. More skeptical scholars may go further still, arguing that many biblical narratives function less as records of supernatural revelation than as retrospective mythmaking, ideological nation-building, or theological reinterpretations of collective memory. Within such frameworks, divine revelation is typically regarded not as an explanatory category, but as a later theological interpretation imposed upon fundamentally human cultural developments.

At the same time, it's important to realize that the existence of historical development, conceptual diversity, or intercultural influence does *not*, in itself, entail falsehood. To assume that a theological concept is an illusion simply because we can trace its historical and cultural origins is to commit the genetic fallacy. The truth value of an idea is independent of the messy, contingent processes through which humanity came to grasp it. Indeed, contemporary biology provides a precise analogy. An evolutionary biologist can trace the gradual emergence of the human eye from simple, light-sensitive patches in early organisms through millions of years of environmental adaptation and intermediary mechanisms. Yet, uncovering this long, complex developmental history does not lead the biologist to conclude that the eye is an illusion, nor that it fails to perceive actual light. The gradual or multifaceted nature of a process does not invalidate the reality of the outcome. At most, it demonstrates that our *perception* of the divine is fallible and subject to gradual refinement; yet the growing clarity we attain in this regard is no more suspect than the increasing understanding we achieve of the physical world through scientific inquiry.

In the same way, it is entirely coherent to propose that a transcendent Mind could guide the cultural and conceptual evolution of humanity to gradually apprehend theological truth, much as it might guide biological evolution to produce complex life. One need not assume that divine revelation, if real, must bypass ordinary historical processes or

arrive in a cultural vacuum. On the contrary, revelation may unfold dynamically through the conceptual vocabulary, symbolic archetypes, and interconnected traditions available to particular civilizations. Tracing Israelite monotheism back to its Ancient Near Eastern roots does not mean the Israelites were merely inventing gods; it may simply mean their conceptual "eyes" were slowly evolving, however imperfectly, to perceive a light that was already there. Such processes could even have served as a preparatory framework for the eventual manifestation of some kind of Avatar or historical self-disclosure, should the Necessary Mind choose to reveal itself more directly. Moreover, if the arguments advanced in Part I are even approximately correct, one must still account for the remarkable fact that these ancient traditions eventually converged upon a concept of God strikingly consistent with independent conclusions deducible from modern modal logic, astrophysical cosmology, and advanced metaphysics.

In any case, nothing in what follows is intended to minimize the legitimacy or seriousness of ANE textual concerns. Yet, even with these complexities in mind, the historical setting in which the New Testament documents emerge *differs* in very important respects from that of the Ancient Near Eastern texts typically involved in these debates. In the case of the Old Testament, the distance between purported events and their final literary forms often spans generations or centuries, and scholars are therefore rightly attentive to the ways in which communal memory, theological reflection, and historical experience may have interacted over time. Such considerations are central to responsible historical work in that field.

The New Testament materials, however, arise within a much narrower chronological window. The earliest Christian claims, traditions, and written sources appear relatively soon after the events they describe, within a milieu that still included direct participants, eyewitnesses, and vocal critics. This temporal proximity does not settle questions of interpretation or truth in advance, nor does it remove the need for critical scrutiny. It does, however, mean that the kinds of concerns most pressing in the study of long-term oral traditions—such as uncontrolled legendary accretion over many centuries—apply differently, and often much less forcefully, in this context.

Moreover, the Gospels are widely recognized in contemporary scholarship not as myth or mytho-history, but as belonging to the genre of ancient biography (*bios*) in the Greco-Roman tradition. This classification has been most influentially argued by Richard A.

Burridge, whose work demonstrates that the formal features of the Gospels closely parallel those of ancient *bioi*—texts concerned with the life, character, and significance of a particular figure.[128]

Unlike myth, which typically functions to situate events within sacred or symbolic frameworks involving gods or archetypal origins, *bios* is oriented toward historically located individuals and presents their actions, teachings, and death as meaningful within a recognizably human and historical framework. It is also distinct from folk legend in that it is not primarily oral-traditional or purely imaginative, but is a written literary form with conventions of selectivity, characterization, and moral or philosophical interpretation. While ancient biography is not modern critical historiography and should not be treated as equivalent to it, its conventions nonetheless permit disciplined historical inquiry: it aims to represent a real individual's life in a way that is responsive to memory, sources, and interpretive judgment, rather than freely mythologizing events outside historical constraint. On this basis, Burridge and others argue that the Gospels are best read as biographical works that engage real historical persons and events through the literary conventions of ancient *bios*.

Consequently, the dividing line in contemporary Jesus scholarship is rarely the raw historical data itself; rather, it is the philosophical framework the historian brings to the text. The presupposition of naturalism—or the lack thereof—profoundly dictates how the evidence of the Gospels is assessed. As the eminent New Testament scholar R.T. France perceptively observes:

"At the level of their literary and historical character we have good reason to treat the Gospels seriously as a source of information on the life and teaching of Jesus, and thus on the historical origins of Christianity. . . . Beyond that point, the decision as to how far a scholar is willing to accept the record they offer is likely to be influenced more by his openness to a 'supernaturalist' world-view than by strictly historical considerations."[129]

It is precisely to break this methodological deadlock that the present work was structured as it is. Had we begun with history alone, the

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[128] Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).
[129] France, R. T. "The Gospels as Historical Sources for Jesus, the Founder of Christianity." *Truth*, vol. 1, 1985, p. 86.

specter of *a priori* naturalism would have preemptively vetoed the resurrection before the historical evidence could even speak. But because the metaphysical investigation of Part I has already established the rational plausibility of a Necessary Mind capable of causal action within the world, the historian is liberated from the constraints of dogmatic naturalism. The evidence can finally be weighed strictly on its own merits.

Any assessment of Jesus must therefore attend to the full complexity of his historical situation. Jesus was a first-century Galilean Jew, operating within a thoroughly Semitic framework of symbols, expectations, and interpretive traditions, while simultaneously embedded in a broader Greco-Roman world shaped by Hellenistic language, politics, and modes of public discourse. His primary spoken language was almost certainly Aramaic, though many scholars hold that he likely possessed at least functional Greek as well—particularly given Galilee's linguistic environment and Jesus' interactions beyond strictly Jewish settings (a view defended, in different ways, by scholars such as Martin Hengel, Craig Keener, Bart Ehrman, and Maurice Casey).[130] Situated at the intersection of these worlds, Jesus articulated claims about authority, forgiveness, divine action, and eschatological fulfillment that were not only intelligible within Second Temple Judaism, but also strikingly personal and, by many contemporary standards, unprecedented.

Importantly, openness to examining the resurrection claim does not require prior agreement on the historical reliability or theological truth of the Old Testament—whether one regards its narratives as broadly factual, heavily reworked, or purely symbolic. Given the conclusions of Part I, in which the existence of a necessary Mind was shown to be at least philosophically plausible, the question becomes whether Jesus'

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[130] See, for example, Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period*, trans. John Bowden, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 1:103–156; Sean Freyne, *Galilee from Alexander the Great to Hadrian: 323 B.C.E. to 135 C.E.* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1980), 125–161; Maurice Casey, *Aramaic Sources of Mark's Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1–15, and *An Aramaic Approach to Q: Sources for the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3–18; Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 136–149; Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 36–58; Stanley E. Porter, "Did Jesus Ever Teach in Greek?" *Tyndale Bulletin* 44, no. 2 (1993): 199–235; John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Vol. 1: The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 216–278.

life, teaching, and reported resurrection might constitute a historically specific disclosure of such a reality. Of course, many religious traditions propose candidates for ultimate revelation, and this plurality must be acknowledged. Yet if Jesus' resurrection were historically true, it would sharply constrain those options; if it were not, the search remains open. Either way, the claim itself warrants careful examination on its own historical merits.

For this reason, New Testament scholarship has developed its *own* methods and standards, not because it is exempt from historical criticism, but because it operates under a different set of evidentiary conditions. The resurrection of Jesus is presented not as a distant myth arising anonymously in a remote past, but as a claim articulated early, publicly, and in ways that invited both acceptance and rejection. Even scholars who remain unconvinced by that claim generally agree that it belongs to a historically accessible period and can be examined using familiar historical criteria.

Accordingly, this chapter does not attempt to resolve broader questions about the origins of Israel or to assume the prior truth of Jewish theological claims. Instead, it asks a more limited question: whether the resurrection claim itself—considered within its first-century setting—offers a coherent and plausible account of the historical evidence, especially given the result of Part I. If the resurrection occurred, it would naturally invite a reassessment of earlier traditions; if it did not, those traditions stand or fall independently. Either way, the inquiry into Jesus' resurrection can proceed without requiring agreement on wider debates that, while important, belong to a different historical and methodological register.

But how should we *now* go about this? We immediately face a difficulty. Because Jesus left no writings of his own, everything we know about his words and deeds comes from the testimony of others. This, however, is hardly unusual in the ancient world. Socrates—one of the greatest minds of classical Greece—also left no written works. Virtually all of our knowledge of his life and teaching comes through the accounts of his disciple Plato. In an analogous way, our knowledge of Jesus comes through the records preserved by his followers.

Yet although this situation is commonplace, it naturally raises the question: how do we know that these records are reliable? It is entirely possible, someone might say, that Jesus' followers attributed to him

words or actions he never actually said or did. More specifically, because the early Christians believed Jesus to be divine, perhaps they created sayings and stories in which Jesus *appears* to claim divinity. If so, the Jesus portrayed in the Gospels could differ dramatically from the historical Jesus who actually lived. How, then, can we determine whether these accounts faithfully reflect history?

Before the modern era, questions like these were effectively unanswerable. But with the rise of textual criticism and the development of modern historical methodology, scholars acquired new tools for probing precisely such issues. As a result, Jesus is no longer treated merely as a figure frozen in stained glass, but as a real, flesh-and-blood individual—on par with figures like Julius Caesar or Alexander the Great—whose life can be investigated using standard historical methods. The writings that make up the New Testament can therefore be examined with the same critical criteria employed in analyzing other ancient sources, such as Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War* or Tacitus' *Annals*.[131]

The first step in any historical investigation of Jesus is to gather our sources. References to Jesus of Nazareth appear across a wide spectrum of ancient literature—Christian, Roman, and Jewish—both inside and outside the New Testament.[132] This is remarkable when one considers how obscure Jesus was by the standards of antiquity. His public ministry spanned, at most, three years, during which he functioned as an itinerant preacher in a relatively insignificant region of Galilee. Yet despite this modest footprint, we possess far more historical information about Jesus than we do for most *major* figures of the ancient world.

The most significant and extensive of these sources were eventually collected into what we now call the New Testament. Extrabiblical references to Jesus generally corroborate what we find in the Gospels, but they contribute relatively little beyond that. For this reason, any

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[131] See John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 1–18; Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1–36; Eldon Jay Epp and Gordon D. Fee, *Studies in the Theory and Method of New Testament Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 1–27.

[132] For citation and examination of these texts, see Robert E. Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000).

serious historical inquiry must center on the documents preserved within the New Testament itself.

Laymen sometimes misunderstand this point. They worry that examining the New Testament writings is a form of circular reasoning, as though one were "using the Bible to prove the Bible." The moment a New Testament passage is cited, they assume one has already presupposed its reliability and is therefore begging the question. But this reflects a misunderstanding of what historians are actually doing. In historical analysis, scholars do not treat the New Testament as a sacred, inspired text and then attempt to validate it by quoting it. Instead, they approach these writings exactly as they would any other ancient documents—subjecting them to critical analysis to determine how reliable they are.

It is crucial to remember that, in the first century, there was no single bound volume called "The New Testament." There were only individual documents: Luke-Acts, the Gospel of John, the Gospel of Mark, Paul's letters to Corinth, and many others. Only centuries later did the church gather these disparate writings into one collection, which came to be known as the New Testament. In assembling this collection, the church selected only the earliest and most authoritative sources—those closest to Jesus and the original disciples—while excluding later, derivative works such as the apocryphal gospels, which were recognized by many even in antiquity as inauthentic. By the very nature of the process, therefore, most of the strongest historical sources ended up within the New Testament.[133] Thus, when someone insists that only sources *outside* the New Testament should count, they fail to appreciate what they are demanding. They are asking historians to discard the earliest, primary accounts of Jesus in favor of later, secondary, and far less reliable material—a methodological approach that would be unthinkable in any other area of ancient history.

This issue is crucial because the dramatic "reinventions" of Jesus that regularly make headlines today rest almost entirely on later writings produced outside the New Testament—chief among them the so-called apocryphal gospels. What are these texts? They are pseudonymous

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[133] See Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 1–36; Lee Martin McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority*, 3rd ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 27–78; F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 97–138.

gospels, composed under the borrowed authority of the apostles' names—works like the *Gospel of Thomas*, *Gospel of Peter*, *Gospel of Philip*, and others. These documents first appear in the latter half of the second century, more than a hundred years after Jesus.[134]

Professor Luke Johnson, a distinguished New Testament scholar at Emory University, notes that nearly all of the recent wave of "real Jesus" books follow a predictable and formulaic script:

1. The author begins by touting his academic credentials and extensive research.
2. He announces some allegedly new—or even suppressed—interpretation of who Jesus truly was.
3. This reinterpretation is said to emerge from sources outside the New Testament, which supposedly enable us to read the Gospels in a way that contradicts their plain sense.
4. The proposed portrait is intentionally provocative—Jesus as the husband of Mary Magdalene, the leader of a hallucinogenic cult, or a wandering cynic philosopher.
5. The implication is that traditional Christian beliefs are thereby discredited and ought to be revised.

Whenever you encounter a book that follows this pattern, your critical antennae should immediately activate. You are likely being misled. The simple fact is that no historically credible source outside the New Testament undermines the portrait of Jesus presented in the canonical Gospels. The apocryphal gospels are late, secondary compositions shaped by theological movements of the second century and beyond. For all the publicity surrounding them, most professional scholars recognize they really offer no reliable alternative picture of Jesus.

Ironically, there *are* sources outside the New Testament writings that are vitally important for studying the historical Jesus—but they are not the late apocryphal texts. Instead, they are the *earlier*, often oral traditions embedded *within* the New Testament itself, quoted or referenced by its authors. These sources bring us even closer to the events of Jesus' life and are therefore less susceptible to legendary development. As modern scholarship has shown, some of these

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[134] See Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), xv–xxiv; Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979), xi–xxxiv.

traditions may originate within as little as five years of Jesus' crucifixion, making them invaluable historical testimony.[135]

Thus, we should not think of the New Testament as a single, unified book. We should see it for what it originally was: a collection of independent first-century documents, each offering a distinct witness to the remarkable life of Jesus of Nazareth. The key historical question, then, is straightforward: How reliable are these documents as sources for the life of Jesus?

When approaching the New Testament as historical evidence, scholars face a fundamental methodological question: are the documents guilty until proven innocent, or innocent until proven guilty? Skeptics often take the former stance, treating the Gospels as theological propaganda whose historical value must be painstakingly rescued, if it exists at all. Believers, by contrast, typically assume their trustworthiness from the outset. The objective historian, however, ought to take a position of *neutrality*. The Gospels and epistles are ancient documents of the first century; they deserve neither automatic rejection nor uncritical acceptance, but the same sober evaluation that historians give to other texts of antiquity.

When assessed by the standards of Greco-Roman historiography, the New Testament sources prove remarkably early and well-attested. In fact, many prominent scholars now believe that there was simply insufficient time for legendary influences to expunge the core historical facts. The distinguished Oxford historian A. N. Sherwin-White, specialized in Greco-Roman history of times prior to and contemporaneous with Jesus, made precisely this point in his *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (1963). According to Professor White, the sources for Roman and Greek history are often biased and removed several generations or even centuries from the events they describe. And yet, historians reconstruct with confidence the course of Roman and Greek history.

The earliest biographies of Alexander the Great, for example, were written by Arrian and Plutarch more than four centuries after Alexander's death. And yet classical historians are able to reconstruct the course of his campaigns and character with considerable

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[135] See C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1964), 11–38; Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 168–206.

confidence. Indeed, as Sherwin-White stresses, the truly fabulous legends about Alexander—those portraying him as a divine demi-god performing mythical feats—do not appear until centuries *after* Arrian and Plutarch, in late sources. According to Sherwin White, the writings of Herodotus enable us to determine the rate at which legend accumulates, and the tests show that even two generations is too short a time span to allow legendary tendencies to wipe out the hard core of historical facts.[136] When Professor Sherwin White turns to the Gospels, he states that for the Gospels to be in their core legends, the rate of legendary accumulation would have to be *unbelievable*. All historians agree that the Gospels were written down and circulated during the first generation after the events, while the eyewitnesses were still alive. In order for the Gospels to be legendary at their core, more generations would be needed. In fact, adding a time gap of two generations to Jesus' death in AD 30 lands you in the second century, when the apocryphal gospels (e.g., Gospel of Peter) first begin to appear. These do contain all sorts of fabulous stories about Jesus, trying to fill in the years between his boyhood and the commencement of his ministry, for example.

This is especially striking given the dating of the Gospel traditions. Most scholars agree that the Synoptic Gospels (Mark, Matthew, Luke) were composed between AD 60–90, within a generation of Jesus' crucifixion. John is usually placed a bit later, but still within living memory of the events. Crucially, the Gospels themselves rely on even earlier *sources*. The Passion Narrative—the account of Jesus' arrest, trial, crucifixion, and burial—was not composed ex nihilo by Mark, but was based on an earlier source. Rudolf Pesch, a leading German specialist on Mark, dates this Passion source to the mid-30s AD, around AD 37—barely seven years after the crucifixion. At such an early date, the possibility of wholesale invention collapses, for

[136] Herodotus, a Greek writer of the fifth century BC, wrote a long work he called *Istoriai*. This Greek word meant "Inquiries" or "Researches," though the work is generally known today as *The Histories*, and our word *history* comes from this title. He was the first writer to try to collect historical information systematically, especially about the war between the Greeks and Persians fought during his parents' lifetime. He claimed to have traveled widely and interviewed eyewitnesses from Babylon to Sicily, although he also liked to include stories that were more colorful than credible, and historians are uncertain whether he actually visited all the places he described. While far from completely reliable, Herodotus's work contains many valuable clues for the careful modern historian. Legendary influences did not erase the core historical facts of the Greco-Persian War.

eyewitnesses—both friendly and hostile—were still alive and able to correct distortions.

The evidence for early tradition is even stronger in the epistles of Paul, which *predate* the Gospels by one to two decades. Paul's letters, undisputed even by the most skeptical scholars (e.g., 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Romans, Philippians, Philemon), provide firsthand testimony to the beliefs and practices of the earliest Christian communities. In these letters Paul not only relays Jesus' teachings (cf. 1 Corinthians 7), but also rehearses traditions about the Last Supper (1 Corinthians 11), the crucifixion and burial (1 Corinthians 15), and the post-mortem appearances of Jesus. One of the most significant texts is 1 Corinthians 15:3–7, where Paul cites a creed he had "received" and then "passed on." Critical scholars, including James D. G. Dunn and Larry Hurtado, date this creed to within five years of Jesus' death, with some (e.g., Joachim Jeremias, Ulrich Wilckens) placing it as early as two years afterward. N. T. Wright notes that this creed represents "the earliest Christian tradition we possess." Some scholars even go so far as to say that the creed must have originated within *months* of the original events. Such proximity makes thorough legendary development virtually impossible.

Moreover, the Gospels demonstrate a proven track record of historical reliability in areas where their claims can be *tested*. Let us look at just one example: Luke. Luke is credited with writing a two-volume work: the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. Although they appear separately in the New Testament, they are really parts of a single composition, divided only because the early church chose to group all four Gospels together. Among the Gospel writers, Luke is the one who most deliberately presents himself as a historian. In the opening lines of his account, he states:

"Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught." (Luke 1:1–4, ESV)

This introduction is written in polished, classical Greek, the sort of style used by the great Greek historians. Afterward, however, Luke shifts into a simpler, more common Greek. By doing so, he signals to the reader that he is capable of writing at the scholarly level but chooses accessibility for his audience. He emphasizes that his narrative comes from a careful, extended investigation and is grounded in eyewitness testimony. Who, then, was this figure we call Luke? From his own writing, it is clear he was not personally an eyewitness to Jesus' life. Yet, an important clue about him surfaces in the book of Acts. Starting in chapter 16, when Paul arrives in Troas (modern-day Turkey), the narrative suddenly shifts into first-person plural: "*We* set sail from Troas to Samothrace," "*We* remained in Philippi some days," "As *we* were going to the place of prayer," and so forth. The simplest and most natural explanation is that the author himself joined Paul on his missionary travels across the Mediterranean world. Eventually, he journeys with Paul back to Israel and ultimately to Jerusalem. This strongly indicates that the author of Luke–Acts had direct access to those who personally witnessed Jesus' ministry while in Jerusalem.

Skeptical critics, however, have tried to dismiss this conclusion by arguing that the "we" sections in Acts were not literal but rather a stylistic convention used in ancient sea voyage stories. The problem is that many of these passages describe events on land, not at sea. More significantly, no such literary convention actually existed in antiquity; the notion is a modern scholarly fabrication. The evidence points inescapably to the fact that Luke–Acts was authored by a traveling companion of Paul who also had the opportunity to interview eyewitnesses of Jesus' life. So, who might some of these eyewitnesses have been? One way to investigate is by identifying what material is unique to Luke's Gospel compared to the other Gospels. Strikingly, much of what is distinctive in Luke revolves around the women who followed Jesus—figures such as Joanna, Susanna, and most notably, Mary, the mother of Jesus.

But was Luke a careful historian? The book of Acts provides the test. Acts overlaps extensively with known secular history of the first century, and its accuracy has been confirmed repeatedly. Classical scholar Colin Hemer, in his work *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, meticulously examined Acts and uncovered an extraordinary level of historical precision. His analysis demonstrates that Luke accurately records everything from the movement of the Alexandrian grain fleet, to the geography of Mediterranean coastlines,

to the varying and sometimes obscure titles of local officials. Time and again, Luke proves to be correct.

As Professor Sherwin-White observed: "The confirmation of historicity in Acts is overwhelming. Any attempt to reject its historicity even in matters of detail must now appear absurd."[137] Similarly, the verdict of the renowned archaeologist Sir William Ramsay still holds: "Luke is a historian of the first rank.... This author should be placed among the very greatest of historians."[138] Given Luke's demonstrated precision, his evident concern for accuracy, and his firsthand contact with eyewitnesses from the earliest generation of Christians, the reliability of this author stands on firm ground.

Of course, one might argue that Luke's accuracy in geographical and circumstantial details is merely a false positive—that his Gospel (and, by extension, the others) functions as a kind of imaginative "historical novel," no more trustworthy than a fictional account of Spider-Man meticulously set within real New York City. Yet this objection is both ad hoc and historically implausible, since no such literary genre existed in the relevant ancient context. More importantly, it misconstrues how historiography actually operates.

As we shall see, historians do not reason, "The author proved reliable in some details; therefore we should trust everything he says." Rather, they critically evaluate sources using established historical criteria in order to extract probable historical facts, even from texts that may also contain error, embellishment, or theological interpretation. The point is not that a source must be wholly reliable to possess historical value, but that genuine historical information can often be discerned through careful critical analysis despite the presence of falsehood or literary shaping. I'll say a bit more about that later.

Taken together, these considerations converge on a powerful conclusion. The New Testament writings, especially Paul's epistles and the Gospels, were written too close in time to the events of Jesus' life, death, and purported resurrection to allow for the complete displacement of fact by legend. Their sources reach back within a handful of years of the crucifixion. Their claims are interwoven with

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[137] A. N. Sherwin-White, Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 189.
[138] William M. Ramsay, The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1915), 222.

checks from living eyewitnesses and embedded in historical contexts that can be tested. And where such claims can be tested, they largely prove accurate. By the standards applied to other works of ancient history, the New Testament documents are not late, untrustworthy legends. They are early, historically credible testimonies—documents that deserve to be treated with the same seriousness as, if not more than, our sources for Alexander, Caesar, or Augustus.

It is crucial to emphasize at this juncture that the argument for the historical credibility of the New Testament is not an argument for biblical inerrancy. The case being made here does not require that every verse of the Gospels be flawless or that every detail be harmonized into a seamless whole. Rather, it is grounded in the sober discipline of contemporary New Testament textual criticism and historical method. These disciplines ask a more modest, but in many ways more powerful, question: do the New Testament writings preserve reliable access to the core events of Jesus' life and the origins of Christianity?

On this question, the evidence appears robust. The Gospels preserve traditions that are not only early, but also *independently* attested across multiple sources. The principle of multiple attestation is a cornerstone of historical method: when independent sources converge on the same event or saying, the probability of its authenticity increases substantially. Thus, Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and post-mortem appearances are not the product of a single theological agenda, but appear across diverse and independent streams of tradition—Paul's letters, Mark's Passion source, Q sayings material, special L and M sources, and later Johannine traditions. This independence demonstrates that the core facts were deeply embedded in the earliest Christian memory and not the invention of a single author or community.

Naturally, this raises a critical question: How do historians know that the Gospels or Pauline letters *actually* represent independent sources, rather than simply copying or borrowing from one another? This is a central issue in historical Jesus research, and scholars have developed a variety of methods to address it with considerable sophistication. Among the key indicators of independence are the following:

1. **Relative Dating and Literary Priority**
   If a text predates another, it cannot have used the later one as a source. For example, Paul's earliest letters (written in the 50s AD) clearly precede the composition of the Gospels by decades. As a result, the traditions Paul cites—creedal formulas, hymns, liturgical fragments, and narrative summaries—represent material that was circulating independently and often notably before the evangelists wrote their accounts. Similarly, Mark is widely regarded as the earliest of the Synoptic Gospels; where Matthew and Luke diverge sharply from Mark or contain material absent from him, those differences point toward additional sources.
2. **Linguistic, Stylistic, and Theological Distinctiveness**
   Independent sources will reflect their own characteristic vocabulary, idioms, rhetorical structures, and theological emphases. Paul's letters, for instance, differ vastly in tone, syntax, and conceptual vocabulary from the narrative style of the Gospels, indicating that Paul is not simply rehearsing Gospel material. The Gospel of John likewise displays a unique theological vocabulary ("light," "truth," "glory," "signs") and narrative structure distinct from the Synoptics, suggesting access to different streams of tradition.
3. **Identifiable Underlying Sources Within the Documents Themselves**
   Historians recognize that the evangelists relied on earlier sources—oral and written. Mark appears to draw on pre-Markan passion narratives and collections of Jesus' sayings. Matthew and Luke seem to have used Mark but also share material ("Q," in traditional terminology) that is absent from Mark and therefore reflects a second, independent line of tradition. Luke explicitly states in his prologue that he consulted multiple earlier sources and eyewitness traditions. John, too, shows signs of drawing from early, independent traditions, particularly in the narrations of certain Jerusalem events.
4. **Divergence of Content and Perspective**
   Independent sources recount events with different emphases, details, and narrative structures. For example, Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of God, his distinctive use of parables, or the events surrounding his Passion all appear in multiple sources with complementary yet varied presentations. Such variations are expected when distinct witnesses or traditions preserve the same underlying events.

5. **Minor Differences and Apparent Tensions (the "Criterion of Variants")**
   Minor discrepancies—variations in wording, order of events, incidental details—strongly indicate independence. If two works were copying each other verbatim, we would expect far greater uniformity. Instead, the Gospels contain numerous small differences—precisely the kinds of divergences we observe in independent testimonies describing a common event. Even the presence of small tensions in the narratives can support independence, since harmonized or coordinated forgeries typically smooth over inconsistencies.
6. **Congruence with Known Historical, Cultural, and Geographical Contexts**
   Independent strands of tradition often preserve distinct elements of the historical environment—local customs, Aramaic expressions, geographical nuances—that reflect authentic memories rather than coordinated invention.
7. **Early Creedal and Liturgical Material Embedded in Later Texts**
   Some passages (e.g., 1 Corinthians 15:3–7; Philippians 2:6–11) are widely recognized as pre-Pauline traditions. Their formulaic structure, Semitic features, and conceptual vocabulary indicate origins within the earliest Jerusalem community—well before the Gospel writers composed their accounts.

Taken together, these methods enable historians to identify multiple, genuinely independent lines of trajectory pointing back to the earliest Christian proclamation. The convergence of these diverse sources—Pauline epistles, pre-Gospel traditions, Markan material, non-Markan Synoptic material, Johannine traditions, and independent early creedal fragments—creates a network of mutually reinforcing evidence that would be extraordinarily unlikely to arise through mere copying. In short, independent attestation does not rest on guesswork or naïve assumptions about the Gospels. It is the product of rigorous literary, linguistic, historical, and source-critical analysis.[139]

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[139] See Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 35–74; Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 89–152; Robert H. Stein, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels: Origin and Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 29–84.

Moreover, the very presence of minor discrepancies between the Gospels, far from undermining their historical value, actually strengthens the case for their independence. Historians recognize that when witnesses to an event produce accounts that agree in substance but diverge in incidental detail, this is a hallmark of authenticity rather than fabrication. If the Gospels presented a perfectly harmonized narrative, it would suggest collusion or artificial smoothing. Instead, the differences—whether in the order of resurrection appearances, in the wording of the inscription on the cross, or in the precise identity of the women at the tomb—reflect the marks of genuine, independent traditions that circulated in the earliest communities. As Richard Bauckham has argued in *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, these variations testify to the living memory of real participants, not to legendary invention.

Thus, contemporary scholarship can affirm with confidence that the Gospels preserve robust historical traditions without requiring a doctrine of inerrancy. They are neither perfect stenographic transcripts nor late legendary fictions. They are, rather, early testimonies rooted in eyewitness memory, transmitted through independent lines of tradition, and preserved within living communities that still contained those who had seen and heard Jesus firsthand. In this sense, the small imperfections of the texts serve to highlight, rather than obscure, their essential reliability.

All of this, once again, is *not* to suggest that we must blindly affirm every detail of the Gospels or Paul's letters as unquestionable. That would be as uncritical as the skeptical posture which dismisses them wholesale. The aim is instead to situate ourselves at a position of *neutrality*, where the New Testament writings are treated with the same methodological respect as other ancient sources. From such a vantage point, the texts may be weighed on their merits, not on prior dogmatic commitments, whether of faith or doubt.

Once this neutrality is established, historians can apply the well-developed tools of critical analysis to evaluate individual sayings or incidents attributed to Jesus. Modern historical criteria allow us to move beyond sweeping generalizations and to make reasoned judgments about particular traditions. For example, the criterion of *historical congruence* (or contextual credibility) asks whether a tradition coheres with what we know of first-century Palestinian Judaism, Roman rule, or wider Mediterranean culture. The criterion of

multiple attestation weighs whether an event or saying appears across independent streams of tradition, increasing its historical plausibility.

Similarly, the criterion of *embarrassment* suggests that material unlikely to have been invented by the early Church—such as Peter's denial of Jesus or the discovery of the empty tomb by women, whose testimony had little legal standing in antiquity—is more likely to be historical. The criterion of *dissimilarity* evaluates whether a saying or action differs both from typical Jewish expectation and from early Christian theological development, thus suggesting its authenticity as originating from Jesus himself. Linguistic analysis also plays a role: *Semitisms*—traces of Aramaic idiom underlying the Greek texts—indicate that we are dealing with very early traditions rooted in the Semitic environment of Jesus' ministry. Finally, the criterion of *coherence* allows traditions already established as authentic to shed light on the credibility of related material.

We can summarize the major criteria as follows:

1. **Historical Congruence:**
   A saying or event (S) aligns with known historical facts about the context in which it is said to have occurred.
2. **Independent, Early Attestation:**
   S appears in multiple, independent sources that are close in time to the alleged event and that neither depend on one another nor derive from a common written source.
3. **Embarrassment:**
   S is awkward, counterproductive, or potentially damaging for the individuals or communities who transmit it, making fabrication unlikely.
4. **Dissimilarity:**
   S is unlike prior Jewish thought-forms and/or unlike later Christian theological developments, suggesting it was not borrowed or invented to serve either agenda.
5. **Semitisms:**
   The narrative contains traces of Aramaic or Hebrew linguistic patterns, indicating an origin in a Semitic-speaking environment.
6. **Coherence:**
   S fits naturally with facts about Jesus already established on the basis of stronger criteria.

It is vital that these criteria be properly stated and understood, since they have often been seriously misused. The criteria are really signs of historical credibility. A story in the Gospels that exhibits one of these signs is, all things being equal, *more* likely to be historical than it would be without it. In other words, the presence of one of these signs increases the probability that the recorded incident is historical. Notice a couple of important points about these "criteria." First, they are all *positive* signs of historical credibility. Therefore, they can only be used to *support* the historicity of an incident, not to *deny* it. If a story is not embarrassing, dissimilar, or found in independent early sources, that obviously does not mean the incident is unhistorical.

The only way one could use the criteria to deny historical credibility would be by presupposing that the Gospels are unreliable until proven reliable. This brings us back again to the issue of the burden of proof. If we approach the Gospels from a position of neutrality, then failing to prove that an incident is historical simply leaves us in a neutral position. We simply do not know whether it is historical or not.

Second, it is crucial to observe that these criteria do *not* presuppose the overall reliability of the Gospels.[140] Rather, they evaluate individual sayings or events in isolation, providing evidence that a specific element of Jesus' life is historical regardless of the trustworthiness of the document in which it appears. For this reason, the same criteria can be applied to reports of Jesus in the apocryphal gospels, in rabbinic literature, or even the Qur'an.

Of course, if the canonical Gospels have shown themselves to be generally reliable, all the better. But these criteria do not depend on such an assumption. They function precisely to identify historical kernels even within material that may otherwise be mixed with legendary or secondary elements. Consequently, we are not obligated to defend the overall reliability of the Gospels or to vindicate every single saying attributed to Jesus.

These criteria, though not infallible, provide a structured and disciplined way to sift historical fact from later embellishment. Once again, such criteria do *not* require that the source they are investigating be broadly reliable or trustworthy. They can still be validly used to

[140] Gerd Theissen and Dagmar Winter, *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus: The Question of Criteria* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 1–37.

extract historical facts by analyzing specific events or sayings even from sources that are highly unreliable or largely distorted by legend.

In other words, even if the Gospels and Pauline epistles are assumed to be highly mythological, deeply superstitious, heavily dogmatic, and replete with legendary material, historians are not thereby left incapable of extracting genuine historical information from them. This is precisely why historians employ critical criteria (among those not already mentioned are the Criterion of Effect, the Criterion of Context and Expectation, and the Principle of Embellishment. The Criterion of Effect examines whether a reported event plausibly explains subsequent historical developments or reactions. The Criterion of Context and Expectation evaluates whether a tradition coheres with the cultural, religious, and historical environment in which it allegedly emerged. The Principle of Embellishment recognizes that traditions often accumulate exaggerations or theological additions over time, allowing historians to work backward toward a more historically plausible core).

Consequently, merely attacking the reliability or provenance of the Gospel traditions is often of limited value to the skeptic. Historians are already acutely aware of the possibility of legend, distortion, and theological bias; indeed, the very existence of these critical methods presupposes such caution. These criteria were developed precisely because ancient sources are not perfectly transparent, stenographic records of events. If the Gospels were regarded as flawless transcripts, there would be little need for sophisticated historical methodology in the first place.

Instead, modern historians utilize a wide range of analytical tools to sift historical data from theological interpretation and legendary development. Alongside traditional historiographical criteria, scholars increasingly employ archaeology, textual criticism, comparative literary analysis, statistical and computational methods, and even artificial intelligence-assisted analysis to evaluate ancient traditions with greater rigor. Through the careful application of these methods, historians can often infer authentic and historically grounded information from texts that are otherwise religiously charged or contaminated by legend. Indeed, this is one of the principal reasons why New Testament scholarship exists as a serious academic discipline *at all*.

Merely asserting that the New Testament contains an “inseparable mixture of history and legend” fundamentally misses the point. The task of the historian is precisely to distinguish, as carefully as possible, between theological embellishment, legendary accretion, and historically recoverable fact—and historians do this routinely. Whatever difficulties the sources present, the discipline of history was developed to confront *exactly* such difficulties. That is how scholars work with sources like *The Gallic Wars*, Plutarch’s *Lives*, or accounts of Alexander the Great's conquests. The New Testament is not methodologically unique in this regard. We must reckon seriously with what historical methodology is actually capable of accomplishing.

At the same time, neither extreme adequately reflects the evidence. The believer is not justified in insisting upon absolute inerrancy; the texts do contain tensions, divergences, and occasional contradictions. Yet this is not necessarily a weakness. On the contrary, such variations often provide strong evidence of independent traditions and sources rather than later collusion or artificial harmonization. But neither is the skeptic justified in claiming that rational inquiry into these texts is therefore futile, or that no substantial historical conclusions can be responsibly drawn from them. That conclusion simply does not follow.

Dogmatism on either side obscures rather than illuminates the evidence. The uncritical apologist treats the texts as though they descended verbatim from heaven, while the radical skeptic dismisses them as though legendary material automatically nullifies historical value. Both approaches bypass the actual work of historical reasoning. Serious scholarship proceeds more carefully: it recognizes the presence of theology, legend, real memory, interpretation, and historical fact operating simultaneously within the texts, and it employs disciplined methods to distinguish among them. Far from rendering historical inquiry impossible, the complexity of the New Testament is precisely what makes critical investigation both necessary and fruitful.

Applied to the New Testament sources, the Criteria of Authenticity yield a striking pattern: at the core of the Jesus tradition stand events and teachings that meet multiple criteria of authenticity. This does not mean that every pericope can be verified with certainty, but it does mean that historians can establish with reasonable confidence a solid framework of events—Jesus’ baptism, ministry, crucifixion, and the explosive belief in his resurrection—that demands explanation. Far from requiring blind faith, such an approach invites careful and critical engagement with the evidence, leading us step by step to the question

that looms largest: what, if anything, can account for the rise of the Christian proclamation that Jesus had conquered death?

In light of the history of New Testament criticism and the methodological neutrality established above, we now turn to what has become known as the "Minimal Facts" approach. This kind of method, developed most notably by Gary Habermas, N.T. Wright, and refined by Michael Licona and others[141], focuses on a set of core facts about Jesus of Nazareth that meet two strict criteria: (1) they are so strongly evidenced historically that they enjoy broad acceptance of scholars who study the subject, including critical and skeptical scholars; and (2) they are accepted because of the historical evidence, not because of theological presuppositions. In essence, when historians critically apply the Criteria of Authenticity to the primary sources, they end up with this set of facts. These "minimal" facts therefore provide a reliable starting point for inquiry, independent of doctrinal commitments.

Contemporary historical Jesus scholarship has, after more than two centuries of rigorous scrutiny, reached something approaching a consensus on these points. They do not represent the totality of Christian claims, but they do represent the bedrock of what professional historians of antiquity agree can be established about Jesus. Let us briefly examine them in turn.

1. Jesus Existed

The overwhelming consensus of historians is that Jesus of Nazareth was a real historical figure. Skeptical scholars such as Bart Ehrman insist that mythicist claims (that Jesus never existed) are fringe positions with no standing in the academic guild. As Ehrman puts it: *"The idea that Jesus did not exist is so extreme that it never occurs to even most critical scholars to take it seriously."* (Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 2012). Independent attestation from non-Christian sources (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44; Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.3.3; Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 10.96) further corroborates that Jesus lived and was known as a wonder-worker and crucified teacher in Judea.

[141] But see Michael Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 35–72, for a highly robust exposition of this approach.

2. Jesus Believed He Had a Unique, Eschatological Relationship with God

Historical Jesus research demonstrates that Jesus proclaimed the arrival of God's kingdom in a unique way that placed himself at its center. E.P. Sanders, a leading Jewish historian, affirms that Jesus' central message was "the coming of the kingdom of God" (*The Historical Figure of Jesus*, 1993). Jesus' frequent references to God as "Abba" (Father) and his role as eschatological judge (cf. Mark 14:61–62; Matthew 11:27) underscore his self-understanding as having a unique sonship to God. James D.G. Dunn argues that Jesus' sense of filial intimacy with God was "unparalleled" in Second Temple Judaism (*Jesus Remembered*, 2003). While scholars debate the precise contours, the consensus is that Jesus believed himself to stand in a special, decisive relationship with God at the turning point of history. According to Ben Witherington, any adequate theory of Jesus' self-understanding must be able to explain the following thirteen established features of the historical Jesus:

1) his independent approach to the Law

2) his feeding of the 5,000

3) his interpretation of his miracles

4) his proclamation of the kingdom of God as present and in-breaking in his ministry

5) his choosing of twelve disciples

6) his use of the *Son of Man*

7) his use of *amēn*

8) his use of *abba*

9) his distinguishing himself from his contemporaries, including John the Baptist, the Pharisees, Jewish revolutionaries, and the disciples

10) his belief that one's future standing with God hinged on how one reacted to his ministry

11) his understanding that his death was necessary to rectify matters between God and his people

12) his sense of mission to the whole of Israel, especially to sinners and outcasts, which led to table fellowship with such people

13) his raising messianic expectations in a repeated pattern of controversy with his contemporaries.[142]

Here is a man who regarded himself as the promised Messiah, the unique Son of God, the Danielic Son of Man (*bar enasha)* to whom all dominion and authority would one day be given. He claimed to speak and act with divine authority, considered himself a worker of miracles, and believed that people's eternal destinies in the kingdom of God hinged on whether or not they placed their trust in him. More than that, however; for the advent of God's kingdom was inseparable from the advent of God himself, as Meyer explains:

"Dalman pointed out that in the targumic literature "the reign of God" appears as a reverential circumlocution for "God" (as ruler). Jeremias rightly finds this phenomenon in Jesus' idiom, as well, so that the words "the reign of God is near!" virtually mean "God is near"—at the door or already here!"[143]

In claiming that in himself the kingdom of God had already arrived, as visibly demonstrated by his actions, Jesus was, in effect, saying that in himself God had drawn near, thus putting himself in God's place. As Gruenler observes: "It is a striking fact of modern New Testament research that the essential clues for correctly reading the implicit Christological self-understanding of Jesus are abundantly clear." He concludes that there is "absolutely convincing evidence" that Jesus did indeed intend to occupy the very place of God himself.[144]

Similarly, Horst Georg Pöhlmann, in his *Abriss der Dogmatik*, states: "In summary, one could say that today there is virtually a consensus concerning that wherein the historical in Jesus is to be seen. It consists in the fact that Jesus came on the scene with an unheard-of authority, namely with the authority of God, with the claim of the authority to

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[142] Witherington, *Christology of Jesus*, 268
[143] Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979),136.
[144] Gruenler, *New Approaches to Jesus and the Gospels*, 74.

stand in God's place and speak to us and bring us to salvation." For Pöhlmann, this constitutes an implicit Christology. He explains:

"This unheard-of claim to authority, as it comes to expression in the antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount, for example, is implicit Christology, since it presupposes a unity of Jesus with God that is deeper than that of all men, namely a unity of essence. This . . . claim to authority is explicable only from the side of his deity. This authority only God himself can claim. With regard to Jesus there are only two possible modes of behavior: either to believe that in him God encounters us or to nail him to the cross as a blasphemer. Tertium non datur."[145]

There is, in other words, no third way.

3. Jesus met His Death by Roman Crucifixion and was Buried by Joseph of Arimathea

The crucifixion of Jesus under Pontius Pilate is among the most secure facts of ancient history, acknowledged by virtually all scholars. John Dominic Crossan, a skeptical member of the Jesus Seminar, writes: *"That he was crucified is as sure as anything historical can ever be."* (*Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 1994). The burial by Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin, is widely regarded as historically credible because it is independently attested in multiple traditions (Mark, Matthew, John, Acts) and unlikely to be invented, since it places a member of the Jewish leadership—otherwise hostile to the Christian movement—in a positive role. The burial tradition also gains credibility from its inclusion in the early Passion source used by Mark, which most scholars date to within a decade of Jesus' death.

4. The Empty Tomb

Here I will briefly summarize six lines of evidence supporting the claim that the tomb of Jesus was discovered empty by a group of his women followers on the first day of the week after his crucifixion.

[145] Horst Georg Pöhlmann, Abriss der Dogmatik, 3rd rev. ed. (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1966), 230.

1) *The historical reliability of Jesus' burial account supports the empty tomb.*
At first glance, one might ask: how does the accuracy of Jesus' burial narrative establish that his tomb was found empty? The reasoning is straightforward. If the burial story is historically reliable, then the location of Jesus' tomb was publicly known in Jerusalem—both to Jew and to Christian alike. In that case, when the disciples began proclaiming that Jesus had risen from the dead, the tomb itself had to be empty.

Why? There are three reasons.

First, the disciples could never have believed in Jesus' resurrection if his body had still been lying in the grave. It would have been utterly foreign to Jewish thought—not to mention absurd—to affirm that a man was raised from the dead while his corpse remained in the tomb. One of the most significant contributions of N. T. Wright's exhaustive study of pre-Christian and Christian resurrection beliefs is his demonstration that "resurrection" always meant *physical, bodily resurrection*. As Wright insists: *"Let us be quite clear at this point . . . when the early Christians said 'resurrection' they meant it in the sense it bore both in paganism (which denied it) and in Judaism (. . . which affirmed it). 'Resurrection' . . . meant bodily resurrection; and that is what the early Christians affirmed."*[146] The suggestion by some critics that the disciples were so convinced of Jesus' resurrection that they never even visited the grave is, on reflection, quite implausible. Are we really to suppose they never once returned to the tomb—if not to verify their claim, then simply to remember where the Lord lay? Moreover, this hypothesis contradicts the evidence that the tomb's location was preserved in early Christian memory.

Second, even if the disciples themselves had proclaimed Jesus' resurrection despite the tomb's being occupied, hardly anyone else would have believed them. One of the most striking facts about the rise of early Christian belief in Jesus' resurrection is that it flourished *in the very city where Jesus had been publicly crucified.* As long as the people of Jerusalem believed that his body still lay in the tomb, almost no one would have been willing to embrace such a claim.

[146] Wright, Christian Origins, 3:209

Third, even granting the unimaginable scenario in which the disciples both believed and preached Jesus' resurrection while his body still rested in the grave, the Jewish authorities could have immediately refuted them. By simply pointing to the tomb—or even exhuming the body if necessary—they could have offered decisive proof that Jesus had not been raised. Even the discovery of indistinct, decomposed remains in the very tomb where Jesus was known to be buried would have been sufficient to expose the Christian proclamation as false. But significantly, no such dispute over the identification of Jesus' corpse ever appears to have taken place. As we will see, the controversy between Jewish non-Christians and the early Christians centered elsewhere. To suggest that the Jewish authorities regarded the claim of Jesus' resurrection as nothing more than a trivial nuisance, unworthy of serious response, is implausible—indeed, fantastic—in light of the evidence. The authorities were demonstrably concerned about suppressing the fledgling Christian movement (consider, for instance, their later commissioning of Saul of Tarsus to persecute it). Thus, if the account of Jesus' burial is historical, the inference to the historicity of the empty tomb is a very short one. It is for this reason that critics who deny the empty tomb often feel compelled to reject the burial narrative as well.

Unfortunately for those critics, however, the burial of Jesus is one of the best-attested facts about his life. While space does not permit a full rehearsal of all the evidence, two points should be highlighted.

First, the burial is multiply attested in extremely early and independent sources. The account of Jesus' burial in a tomb by Joseph of Arimathea forms part of the pre-Markan passion source. This material is widely regarded as very early, likely rooted in eyewitness testimony, and, according to commentator Rudolf Pesch, dates to within seven years of the crucifixion.

Second, Paul himself appeals to a still earlier Christian tradition in 1 Corinthians 15:3–5:

…that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures,
and that he was buried,
and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,
and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve.

Paul likely received this tradition during his visit to Jerusalem in A.D. 36 (Galatians 1:18), if not earlier while in Damascus. In either case, the creed reaches back within the first five years after Jesus' death. It functioned as a summary of the earliest Christian proclamation and may have been used in catechesis. Its compact, formulaic structure—evident in the repeated phrase "and that" (*kai hoti*) marking each line—suggests that it was designed for memorization, presenting four distinct and sequential events: Christ died, he was buried, he was raised, and he appeared.

But is the burial mentioned in Paul's tradition the same as the burial by Joseph of Arimathea described in the Gospels? The answer becomes clear when Paul's four-line formula is set alongside both the Gospel narratives and the sermons in Acts:

1 Corinthians 15:3–5	**Acts 13:28–31**	**Mark 15:37–16:7**
Christ died . . .	Though they could charge him with nothing deserving death, yet they asked Pilate to have him killed.	And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last.
he was buried . . .	they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb	And he [Joseph] bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb.
he was raised . . .	But God raised him from the dead . . .	"He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him."
he appeared . . .	. . . and for many days he appeared to those who came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people.	"But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him."

The remarkable correspondence of these independent traditions confirms that Paul's four-line formula is indeed an outline of the same basic sequence preserved in the Gospels and Acts: the death of Jesus, his burial in a tomb, his resurrection, and his appearances. This correlation constitutes powerful evidence that Jesus' burial in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb is historically secure.

We thus possess testimony from two of the earliest and independent sources in the New Testament affirming Jesus' burial in the tomb—evidence which, in turn, lends strong support to the historicity of the empty tomb. But that is not all. Further independent testimony to Jesus' burial by Joseph of Arimathea is also found in the sources behind Matthew, Luke, and John, as well as in the extra-biblical *Gospel of Peter*. The variations between Mark's account and those of Matthew and Luke suggest that the latter drew on sources in addition to Mark. These differences are unlikely to be explained away as Matthew's and Luke's mere editorial modifications of Mark, given their uneven and sporadic character, the puzzling omission of events such as Pilate's interrogation of the centurion, and the striking verbal agreements between Matthew and Luke in contrast to Mark.

The first two considerations could just as plausibly be explained by abandoning the rigid stratigraphic model of Gospel dependence in favor of oral performance models, in which the enduring stability of the core tradition—Joseph's entombment of Jesus—commends its historicity. The third consideration, however, is harder to dismiss: why would Matthew and Luke independently agree in their versions against Mark if not because of a common source or stable tradition? Either way—whether through additional written sources or an enduring oral tradition—the fact of Joseph's burial of Jesus shines through.

Moreover, John's Gospel provides yet another independent witness. As Paul Barnett observes: *"Careful comparison of the texts of Mark and John indicate that neither of these Gospels is dependent on the other. Yet they have a number of incidents in common: for example . . . the burial of Jesus in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea."*[147] Finally, the early apostolic sermons preserved in Acts—likely not the invention of Luke, but a record of the primitive Christian proclamation—also refer to Jesus' burial. Taken together, we thus have at least four, and perhaps more, independent sources for the burial of Jesus, some of which are extraordinarily early.

Second, Joseph of Arimathea himself is an unlikely Christian invention. He is described as a wealthy member of the Jewish Sanhedrin—the ruling council of seventy men who presided in Jerusalem and who, according to Mark, unanimously condemned Jesus. In the eyes of the early Christians, the Sanhedrists bore responsibility

[147] Paul Barnett, Jesus and the Logic of History, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), 104–5.

for the judicial murder of Jesus; indeed, the Acts sermons charge the Jewish leaders directly with his crucifixion (Acts 2:23, 36; 4:10). Given such hostility toward the Sanhedrin, it is implausible that the early church would invent a story in which one of its members properly cared for Jesus' burial. As the late New Testament scholar Raymond Brown concludes, Jesus' burial by Joseph is "very probable," precisely because it is "almost inexplicable" why Christians would fabricate a tale about a Jewish Sanhedrist doing right by Jesus.

For these reasons and others, the majority of New Testament scholars agree that Jesus was buried by Joseph of Arimathea in a tomb. As Cambridge scholar John A. T. Robinson affirmed, the burial of Jesus in the tomb is "one of the earliest and best-attested facts about Jesus." But if this conclusion holds—and it is difficult to dispute—then, as we have already seen, the historicity of the empty tomb follows as a near inevitability.

2) *The discovery of Jesus' empty tomb is multiply attested in very early, independent sources.* The pre-Markan passion source almost certainly did not conclude with Jesus' burial, but also included the account of the women's discovery of the empty tomb. The burial and empty tomb narratives form a single, seamless story, joined together by grammatical and linguistic connections. It is implausible that the early church would have circulated a passion narrative ending with nothing more than the burial of Jesus. Such a conclusion would have been incomplete—an unresolved tragedy without victory. Hence, the most natural conclusion is that the pre-Markan passion source included, and perhaps ended with, the women's discovery of the empty tomb.

Moreover, we have already noted that in 1 Corinthians 15:3–5 Paul cites an extremely early tradition which refers to Christ's burial and resurrection. Although the formula does not explicitly mention the empty tomb, comparison with the Gospel narratives and the Acts sermons reveals that the third line—"he was raised"—functions as a compressed summary of the empty tomb story, echoing the angelic proclamation, *"He is risen!"*

Two features of this tradition strongly suggest that the empty tomb is presupposed.

First, the juxtaposition of the phrases "he was buried" and "he was raised" naturally implies an empty grave. For the earliest Christians,

there was no distinction between resurrection and *physical, grave-emptying resurrection*. To suppose otherwise is to read back into antiquity a peculiarly modern idea of a "spiritual resurrection" that leaves the corpse behind. As E. E. Ellis aptly remarks: *"It is very unlikely that the earliest Palestinian Christians could conceive of any distinction between resurrection and physical, 'grave-emptying' resurrection. To them an anastasis (resurrection) without an empty grave would have been about as meaningful as a square circle."*[148] Thus, for the earliest disciples to affirm that Christ had been buried and then raised is to affirm implicitly that his tomb was left vacant. And given how close this tradition is to the events themselves, the claim would have been unthinkable had the tomb not in fact been empty.

Second, the phrase "on the third day" likewise points to the empty tomb. No one witnessed the resurrection itself; so why did the earliest disciples date it to "the third day"? Why not the fifth, or the seventh? The most plausible answer is that it was on the third day that the women discovered the tomb to be empty. Accordingly, the resurrection itself was naturally dated to that day. The phrase "on the third day," then, functions as a time-indicator referring back to the empty tomb tradition.

Taken together, this means we possess extraordinarily early and independent evidence for the empty tomb. The discovery of Jesus' empty tomb cannot be dismissed as a late legendary embellishment; it belongs to the bedrock of the earliest Christian proclamation. But there is more. Once again, there are strong reasons to recognize independent sources for the empty tomb in the other Gospels and in Acts.

Matthew is clearly drawing on an independent source, for he alone records the unique story of the guard at the tomb. His account also shows traces of prior tradition in its non-Matthean vocabulary.[149]

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[148] E. Earle Ellis, ed., *The Gospel of Luke*, New Century Bible (London: Nelson, 1966), 273.

[149] Dr. William Lane Craig highlights several words or expressions which are unique in all the New Testament, such as "on the next day," "the preparation day," "deceiver," "guard (of soldiers)," "to make secure," "to seal." The expression "chief priests and Pharisees" is unusual for Matthew and never appears in Mark or Luke. The expression "on the third day" is also non-Matthean; he always uses "after three days." In general only 35 of Matthew's 136 words in the empty tomb story are found in Mark's 138 words. Similarly, only 16 of Luke's 123 words are found in Mark's account. Moreover, Matthew and Luke have only a dozen words in common, which shows the independence of their traditions.

Moreover, his comment, *"This story has been spread among Jews till this day"* (Matt. 28:15), makes clear that he is responding to a polemical tradition already circulating in his time.

Luke also appears to rely on an independent source, since he recounts the episode—absent from Mark—of two disciples personally verifying the women's report that the tomb was empty. This story cannot be dismissed as a Lukan invention, for it is independently attested in John's Gospel. And given John's recognized independence from the Synoptics, this supplies yet another source for the empty tomb.

Finally, the apostolic sermons preserved in Acts contain indirect references to the empty tomb. For example, Peter contrasts David—who *"both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day"*—with Jesus, of whom he declares, *"this Jesus God raised up"* (Acts 2:29–32 ESV; cf. 13:36–37). The implication is unmistakable: unlike David's occupied tomb, Jesus' was empty.

Historians typically regard themselves as having struck gold when they can identify two independent accounts of the same event. In the case of Jesus' empty tomb, we are confronted with far more—a surplus of independent sources, no fewer than six in all, several of which are among the earliest traditions preserved in the New Testament.[150]

3) *The phrase "the first day of the week" reflects an ancient tradition.* According to Mark's account, the women discovered the empty tomb "on the first day of the week." We have already seen that the earliest Christian tradition quoted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 declares that Jesus was raised "on the third day." As E. L. Bode points out, if the

[150]As William Lane Craig points out, it is ironic, then, that Allison deems Jesus' burial by Joseph of Arimathea to be "well attested" and therefore "highly likely," while complaining that scholarly opinion is divided over how many independent sources we have for the empty tomb (Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus,* 300, 354, 362). There is a clear double standard operative here. Notice that as in the case of Joseph's burial of Jesus, multiple, independent attestation militates against the possibility, taken with grave seriousness by Allison, that the empty tomb narrative is an imaginative Christian fabrication or legend (ibid., 311). Its presence, like that of the burial narrative, in such early, independent sources makes such a possibility very unlikely. Notice, too, that the possibility of Christian fabrication or legend is predicated upon an important condition: "Christians might . . . have been able to reason like this without fear of contradiction if the location of Jesus' burial or disposal were unknown, or if too much time had passed since his death" (ibid., 307)—a condition Allison himself admits is unmet (ibid., 232, 362).

empty tomb story were a later legendary development, we would expect it to be cast in terms of this widely accepted "third-day" motif. The fact that Mark instead reports the discovery of the empty tomb as occurring "on the first day of the week" strongly suggests that his source is very old, older even than the "third-day" formula itself.

This conclusion is reinforced by the linguistic character of the phrase. In Greek, *te mia ton sabbaton* ("the first day of the week") is an awkward construction, using a cardinal rather than an ordinal number and employing "Sabbath" as a synonym for "week." Yet when translated back into Aramaic, the language of Palestinian Jews in the first century, the expression is perfectly natural. This linguistic feature indicates that the empty tomb tradition is rooted in an early Palestinian context, not the product of a later Hellenistic or legendary development.

Thus, the simple phrase "the first day of the week" provides subtle but powerful confirmation of the antiquity of the empty tomb tradition.

4) *The Markan story is simple and lacks legendary development*. As with the burial account, Mark's narrative of the empty tomb is striking in its simplicity and restraint. It is unembellished by the theological or apologetic motifs that typically characterize later legendary accounts. The resurrection itself is neither witnessed nor described. There is no triumphant reflection on Jesus' victory over sin and death, no exalted Christological titles, no quotations of fulfilled prophecy, and no description of the Risen Lord himself.

Some readers might balk at the presence of the angel. Yet there is no compelling reason to suppose the tradition originally lacked him. Even if one were to treat the angel as a purely literary figure, serving only to interpret the meaning of the vacant tomb, the result is not a more elaborate narrative but one that is even starker and more barebones (compare John 20:1–2).

The restrained nature of Mark's account is best appreciated when set alongside genuine legendary material, such as the account in the *Gospel of Peter*. There, Jesus' resurrection is portrayed in extravagant, mythic detail: a colossal figure whose head towers above the clouds emerges from the tomb, flanked by giant angels; a cross follows behind him, speaking aloud; a heavenly voice proclaims the event; and it is all witnessed not only by Roman guards, but also by Jewish leaders and a

multitude of spectators. That is what actual legend looks like—lavishly colored by theological and apologetical imagination.

By contrast, Mark's account is stark, sober, and restrained. Its very simplicity is a powerful indication of its historical reliability.

5) *The tomb was probably discovered empty by women.* To appreciate the significance of this point, we must recall two features of the place of women in first-century Jewish society.

First, women were not considered credible witnesses. Josephus, summarizing what he took to be Mosaic regulations on admissible testimony, declares: *"Let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex"* (*Antiquities* 4.8.15 §219). While no such restriction is actually found in the Pentateuch, this statement reflects the patriarchal ethos of Jewish society in the period.

Second, women occupied a low rung on the social ladder. They were regarded as second-class citizens compared to men. Rabbinic writings reflect this attitude: *"Sooner let the words of the Law be burnt than delivered to women!"* (*Sotah* 19a); *"Happy is he whose children are male, but unhappy is he whose children are female!"* (*Kiddushin* 82b). Every Jewish man's daily prayer included the blessing: *"Blessed are you, Lord our God, ruler of the universe, who has not created me a woman"* (*Berachos* 60b).

Now, against this backdrop, it is truly remarkable that all four Gospels present women as the discoverers of the empty tomb and the primary witnesses to its vacancy. If the empty tomb story were a late Christian legend, it is far more likely that the male disciples—Peter, John, or another leading figure—would have been given pride of place as the discoverers. The fact that women, whose testimony was widely discounted, are uniformly presented as the chief witnesses is best explained by the simple fact that they really were the ones who found the tomb empty. This criterion of *embarrassment* strongly supports the historicity of the narrative.

Skeptical critics have proposed a variety of alternative explanations for the women's role, but none withstand scrutiny. John Dominic Crossan once suggested that the women were vestiges of an earlier *Secret Gospel of Mark*—a claim discredited when the so-called Secret Gospel

was shown to be a fraud perpetrated by Morton Smith. Other critics argue that the men were absent because they had fled. But this is implausible, requiring the unlikely hypothesis that the disciples, fleeing the arrest of Jesus, immediately returned all the way to Galilee. As one scholar noted, this is "a fiction of the critics." Moreover, it ignores the fact that *legends, by their very nature, are no respecters of fact.* As Dale Allison insists: *"It is the hallmark of legends to sin against the established facts. Why should Mark . . . be more conscientious? Why not bring Peter and other more important disciples on the stage despite what really happened?"*[151]

Still others claim that Mark portrayed the women as the first witnesses precisely to explain why the empty tomb remained unknown until his Gospel was written—because the women "said nothing to anyone" (Mark 16:8). But this is much too clever by half. First, as we have already seen, the empty tomb tradition is extremely early, not a late legendary invention. Second, are we really to suppose that for thirty years no one in the Jerusalem church thought to ask the very women whom Mark himself places at the crucifixion what happened afterward? Even after the resurrection appearances, are we to imagine that they remained completely silent? Such a reading strains credulity. It is far more reasonable to conclude, as Matthew and Luke clearly did, that Mark intended the women's silence to be temporary—"as they fled back to the disciples"—for the angel had explicitly commanded them to report the news of the resurrection (Mark 16:7).

The strained and contrived nature of these skeptical proposals only underscores the historical credibility of the women's role. Indeed, probably no other factor has been more persuasive to scholars concerning the historicity of the empty tomb than the unanimous witness of the Gospels that it was women—socially marginalized, legally discounted, and religiously disregarded—who first discovered it.

6) *The earliest Jewish polemic presupposes the empty tomb*. In Matthew 28:11–15 (RSV) we encounter the earliest Christian attempt to answer the Jewish polemic against the proclamation of the resurrection:

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[151] Dale C. Allison Jr., "Explaining the Resurrection: Conflicting Convictions," Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus 3 (2005): 128; cf. Allison, Resurrecting Jesus, 329–30.

While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sum of money to the soldiers and said, "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." So they took the money and did as they were directed; and this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

Our primary interest here is not in the guard narrative itself, but in Matthew's incidental remark: *"This story has been spread among the Jews to this day."* This reveals that the evangelist is responding to an already-circulating Jewish explanation of the resurrection claim. And what was that explanation? Not that the disciples were deluded or intoxicated, not that Jesus' body still lay in the tomb, but rather: *"The disciples came and stole the body."*

Think carefully about this. The Jewish polemic did not deny the empty tomb—it *presupposed* it. In attempting to explain the missing body, the Jewish authorities implicitly conceded the very fact Christians proclaimed: the tomb was empty.

Skeptical critics have often dismissed Matthew's guard story as a later apologetic legend. Yet even if the guard detail itself is legendary, what cannot be denied is that the story was aimed at rebutting a widespread Jewish allegation that the disciples had stolen Jesus' body. And that allegation itself implies that the tomb was empty. Moreover, the story bears marks of tradition-history that point back to an ongoing polemical exchange:

- **Christian:** "The Lord is risen!"
- **Jew:** "No, his disciples stole away his body."
- **Christian:** "But the guard at the tomb would have prevented such a theft."
- **Jew:** "Then the guard must have fallen asleep."
- **Christian:** "The chief priests bribed the guard to spread this lie."

Such a pattern is best explained as originating in the earliest controversies in Jerusalem, right after the disciples began proclaiming Jesus' resurrection. Notice also: the idea of a guard could only have been a Christian, not a Jewish, development, since it served the

Christian apologetic. Conversely, the claim that the guard fell asleep is clearly a Jewish counter-claim, one that would not benefit Christian polemic. Finally, the notion of bribery arises only at the last stage, as the Christian rejoinder to the Jewish allegation. This developing back-and-forth reveals the historical depth of the dispute and confirms that the original Jewish response was simply that the body had been stolen.

Thus, the very *enemies* of the early Christian movement, in their attempt to explain away the resurrection claim, provided indirect confirmation of the empty tomb. This is evidence of the highest historical value, because it comes not from Christian proclamation but from those hostile to it.

Taken together, these six lines of evidence form a powerful cumulative case that Jesus' tomb was indeed found empty on the first day of the week by a group of his women followers. As a historical fact, this is very well established. D. H. Van Daalen concludes: *"It is extremely difficult to object to the empty tomb on historical grounds; those who deny it do so on the basis of theological or philosophical assumptions."*[152] But such assumptions cannot erase the facts themselves. Increasingly, New Testament scholarship has recognized this. As Jacob Kremer, a specialist in the resurrection, affirms: *"By far most exegetes hold firmly to the reliability of the biblical statements about the empty tomb."*[153] In a survey of more than 2,200 publications on the resurrection since 1975, Gary Habermas found that a broad and

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[152] D. H. Van Daalen, *The Real Resurrection* (London: Collins, 1972), 41. As Craig notes, Allison is a good case in point. He recognizes that "a decent case" can be made for the empty tomb but thinks that there is "a respectable case against it" (Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus*, 331). This supposedly respectable case consists of only two arguments: first, "the ability of early Christians to create fictions" and, second, "the existence of numerous legends about missing bodies" (ibid., 332). But these two considerations show at the very most the possibility that the empty tomb narrative is a legend. This is a possibility we are aware of based on our general background knowledge *prior* to an examination of the specific evidence. These two considerations do nothing to show that, based on an examination of the specific evidence, the narrative of the empty tomb *is* a fiction or legend. Allison's skepticism is rooted in his initial philosophical doubts, which he candidly expresses, about the literal resurrection of Jesus (ibid., 225; cf. 344). That someone exhibiting such proclivity against the empty tomb, doubtless because of his philosophical reservations about the material continuity of the resurrected body with the mortal body, should nonetheless feel compelled to affirm the historicity of the empty tomb is testimony to the strength of the evidence in its favor.

[153] Jacob Kremer, *Die Osterevangelien—Geschichten um Geschichte* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1977), 49–50.

robust quantity of scholars who have written on the subject accept the historicity of the discovery of the empty tomb.[154] So compelling is the evidence that even several prominent Jewish scholars—such as Pinchas Lapide and Geza Vermes—have declared themselves persuaded that Jesus' tomb was indeed found empty.

5. Post-Mortem Appearances of Jesus

In 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 (RSV), Paul writes:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received,
that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures,
and that he was buried,
and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,
and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve.
Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time,
most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.
Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.
Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

This passage is nothing short of remarkable. Here we have an indisputably authentic letter from Paul, a man personally acquainted with the earliest disciples, who recounts their testimony that they had seen Jesus alive after his death. Even more striking, Paul himself claims to have experienced an appearance of the risen Jesus.

What are we to make of such extraordinary claims? Did Jesus in fact appear to people alive after his crucifixion? Once again, space will not allow us to explore in detail all of the evidence for Jesus' post-mortem appearances. But some major lines of evidence stand out.

1) *Paul's list of eyewitnesses guarantees that resurrection appearances occurred.*
As we saw in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul cites an early tradition that lists multiple witnesses to Jesus' resurrection appearances. Let us briefly consider the plausibility of each appearance.

[154] Gary Habermas, "Experience of the Risen Jesus: The Foundational Historical Issue in the Early Proclamation of the Resurrection," Dialog 45 (2006): 292.

a) *The appearance to Peter.*
Although none of the Gospels narrates a detailed story of Jesus' appearance to Peter, the fact itself is firmly established. It appears in the primitive tradition quoted by Paul, which originated in the Jerusalem church, and Paul personally affirms it. From Galatians 1:18, we know that Paul spent two weeks with Peter in Jerusalem just three years after his Damascus Road experience. He therefore knew firsthand whether Peter himself claimed to have seen the risen Jesus.

In addition, the appearance to Peter surfaces in another early tradition preserved in Luke 24:34 (AT): *"The Lord has really risen, and has appeared to Simon!"* That Luke is drawing upon tradition here is evident from the somewhat awkward way the statement intrudes into his Emmaus narrative. Thus, even without a detailed story, the fact of an appearance to Peter is well attested. For this reason, even the most skeptical New Testament critics generally concede that Peter had such an experience of seeing Jesus alive after his death.

b) *The appearance to the Twelve.*
This reference points to the original group of Jesus' disciples (minus Judas), whose formal designation as "the Twelve" remained intact. This is the best-attested of all the resurrection appearances. It is part of the earliest Christian tradition cited by Paul, and Paul himself had direct contact with members of the Twelve. Moreover, we find independent accounts of this appearance in Luke 24:36–42 and John 20:19–20.

What is most notable about these accounts is the emphasis on the physicality of the risen Jesus. He shows them his wounds; he eats in their presence. These details underscore two points: first, that Jesus was raised bodily, not merely in some visionary or spiritual sense; and second, that the risen one was the same Jesus who had been crucified. The demonstrations were meant to establish both the corporeality and the continuity of the resurrection body.

Taken together—the early tradition cited by Paul, his personal contact with the Twelve, and the independent accounts in Luke and John—this evidence makes it highly certain that the disciples did in fact experience what they took to be an appearance of Jesus alive after his death.

c) *The appearance to more than five hundred brethren.* The third appearance on Paul's list is, at first glance, astonishing: *"Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time."* This is

remarkable, since the event is not mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament. Its absence from the Gospels might tempt one to skepticism—but Paul's own words strongly indicate that the event was widely known in the earliest church.

Paul makes the striking parenthetical remark: *"most of whom remain until now, though some have fallen asleep."* Why would he add this detail? As the Cambridge scholar C. H. Dodd observes: *"There can hardly be any purpose in mentioning the fact that the most of the 500 are still alive, unless Paul is saying, in effect, 'The witnesses are there to be questioned.'"*[155] Paul could never have written such words had the event never occurred, or if no witnesses were available. The fact that Paul knew some had since died demonstrates that he had personal acquaintance with the group. The only reasonable conclusion is that this extraordinary event did take place.

Why then do the Gospels omit it? The most likely answer is geographical. As one compares the resurrection narratives, a pattern emerges: appearances occur first in Jerusalem, then in Galilee, and finally once more in Jerusalem. The appearance to the five hundred would almost certainly have been a large, outdoor gathering, perhaps on a hillside in Galilee, where during his ministry Jesus had often addressed great multitudes. Since the Gospels give greater attention to the Jerusalem appearances, they may have omitted this Galilean appearance simply by choice of focus.

An intriguing possibility is that this is the very appearance foretold by the angel in the pre-Markan passion narrative and later described by Matthew (28:16–17): *"Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him; but some doubted."* If so, then Matthew's brief account may be a compressed version of the appearance to the five hundred.

Either way, Paul's testimony, his awareness of living eyewitnesses, and his challenge to verify their claims stand as powerful historical

[155] C.H. Dodd, "The Appearances of the Risen Christ: A Study in the Form Criticism of the Gospels," in *More New Testament Studies* (Manchester: University of Manchester, 1968), 128.

evidence that this mass appearance of the risen Jesus was firmly rooted in the earliest tradition.

d) *The appearance to "all the apostles."* Paul next records that Jesus appeared to *"all the apostles."* This was likely an appearance to a broader circle of Christian missionaries somewhat wider than the Twelve, such as the group described in Acts 1:21–22—those who had accompanied Jesus from the beginning and were later commissioned as witnesses of his resurrection.

Once again, the historical credibility of this appearance is underlined by Paul's own connection with the apostolic circle. Paul personally knew these leaders, conversed with them, and even cross-checked his gospel message against theirs (Galatians 2:1–10). Given this personal acquaintance, his inclusion of their testimony here can be regarded as a direct reflection of what they themselves claimed and believed.

Thus, the appearance to "all the apostles" provides yet another strand of early, independent testimony that the risen Jesus was seen alive by those who had been with him from the start.

2) *The Gospel accounts provide multiple, independent attestation of postmortem appearances of Jesus.* The Gospels independently attest to Jesus' resurrection appearances—some of the very same appearances already mentioned in Paul's early list. Wolfgang Trilling explains the significance of this:

"From the list in I Cor. 15 the particular reports of the Gospels are now to be interpreted. Here may be of help what we said about Jesus' miracles. It is impossible to 'prove' historically a particular miracle. But the totality of the miracle reports permits no reasonable doubt that Jesus in fact performed 'miracles.' That holds analogously for the appearance reports. It is not possible to secure historically the particular event. But the totality of the appearance reports permits no reasonable doubt that Jesus in fact bore witness to himself in such a way."[156]

[156] Wolfgang Trilling, Fragen zur Geschichtlichkeit Jesu (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1966), 153. With respect to Jesus' miracles, Trilling had written: "We are convinced and hold it for historically certain that Jesus did in fact perform miracles. . . . The miracle reports occupy so much space in the Gospels that it is impossible that they could all have been subsequently invented or transferred to Jesus" (ibid.).

Trilling's conclusion, however, is actually too modest. For just as we can justifiably affirm the historicity of specific miracles of Jesus—such as the feeding of the 5,000—so too can we affirm the historicity of specific appearances. Consider the following:

- **The appearance to Peter** is independently attested by both Paul and Luke (1 Cor. 15:5; Luke 24:34) and is universally acknowledged by critics.
- **The appearance to the Twelve** is independently attested by Paul, Luke, and John (1 Cor. 15:5; Luke 24:36–43; John 20:19–20). Even those skeptical of the physical demonstrations agree that such an appearance took place.
- **The appearance to the women disciples** is independently attested by Matthew and John (Matt. 28:9–10; John 20:11–17). This is further strengthened by the criterion of embarrassment, given the extremely low credibility accorded to female testimony in first-century Judaism. The absence of this appearance from Paul's list is almost certainly explained by the same discomfort in citing women as witnesses.
- **The Galilean appearances** are independently attested by Mark, Matthew, and John (Mark 16:7; Matt. 28:16–17; John 21). When viewed sequentially, the appearances fit a natural pattern of movement: Jerusalem → Galilee → Jerusalem, corresponding to the disciples' festival pilgrimages—from the Passover/Feast of Unleavened Bread in Jerusalem, back to Galilee, and then again to Jerusalem two months later for Pentecost.

What should we conclude from this evidence? One may attempt to label these experiences "hallucinations," but what cannot be denied is that they occurred. As Norman Perrin of the University of Chicago put it: *"The more we study the tradition with regard to the appearances, the firmer the rock begins to appear upon which they are based."*[157] Gerd Lüdemann is even more emphatic: *"It may be taken as historically certain that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus' death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ."*[158]

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[157] Norman Perrin, The Resurrection According to Matthew, Mark, and Luke (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 80.
[158] Gerd Lüdemann, What Really Happened to Jesus? trans. John Bowden (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 80.

In short: on multiple occasions and to different individuals and groups, people had experiences in which Jesus appeared to them alive after his death. That these experiences took place is virtually indisputable—and, in fact, is scarcely disputed even among critical scholars today.

3) The Resurrection Appearances Were Physical, Bodily Events. Up to this point, the evidence presented has not depended on whether the post-mortem appearances of Jesus were physical or visionary in nature. That question remains open. We must still ask whether even visionary experiences of the risen Jesus can be plausibly accounted for by psychological models. However, if the appearances were *physical* and *bodily*, a purely psychological explanation becomes virtually impossible. It is therefore worth examining what can be known about the nature of these appearances.

a) Paul's Implication of Physicality. Paul's writings imply that the resurrection appearances were bodily in two key ways.

First, he clearly conceives of the resurrection as involving a *body*, not merely the immortality of the soul. In *1 Corinthians 15:42–44*, Paul contrasts the present earthly body with the future resurrection body—one patterned after Christ's own. He identifies four essential contrasts:

Earthly Body	**Resurrection Body**
Mortal	Immortal
Dishonorable	Glorious
Weak	Powerful
Natural	Spiritual

Only the final contrast—*natural* versus *spiritual*—might suggest that Paul envisioned a non-physical resurrection body. Yet this misunderstanding arises from how we translate those terms. The word rendered "natural" (*psychikos*) literally means "soulish." Obviously, Paul does not mean that our present bodies are made of soul; rather, he refers to bodies *dominated by* or *belonging to* the realm of human nature. Likewise, "spiritual" (*pneumatikos*) does not mean "made out of spirit," but rather "dominated by" or "oriented toward" the Spirit.

Paul uses these very same words in *1 Corinthians 2:14–15*:

"The natural man (*anthropos psychikos*) does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him… The spiritual man (*anthropos pneumatikos*) judges all things but is himself judged by no one."

Here, "natural man" does not mean "physical man," but "man governed by human nature," and "spiritual man" means "man governed by the Spirit," not "immaterial man." The contrast in chapter 15 follows the same logic. The earthly body, now subject to human frailty and sin, will be transformed—freed from corruption and fully empowered by God's Spirit. Thus, Paul's doctrine of resurrection presupposes a *physical* body renewed and spiritualized, not discarded.

Second, Paul—and indeed the entire New Testament—distinguishes conceptually between an *appearance* of Jesus and a *vision* of Jesus. The resurrection appearances soon ceased, whereas visions continued in the early church. The difference, as the New Testament suggests, lies here: a vision, though divinely caused, occurs only within the mind, whereas an appearance takes place externally, in the objective world.

Compare Stephen's vision in *Acts 7* with the resurrection appearances. Stephen saw a bodily image of Jesus, but this was a *vision*—an inward experience that no one else shared. By contrast, the resurrection appearances occurred "out there" in the external world and were accessible to multiple witnesses simultaneously. Even Paul's encounter on the Damascus Road, though after the Ascension, qualifies as an *appearance* because it involved outward phenomena that his companions also perceived to varying degrees.

This conceptual distinction between *vision* and *appearance* therefore supports the conclusion that the resurrection appearances were physical and objective.

b) The Gospels' Testimony of Bodily Resurrection. The Gospel narratives reinforce this conclusion in two important ways. **First**, every resurrection appearance reported in the Gospels is explicitly *physical* and *bodily*. The unanimity of this testimony is striking. If the earliest experiences of Jesus had been non-physical visions, it would be astonishing that all Gospel accounts—without exception—depict tangible encounters, with no remaining trace of any purely visionary tradition. Such a thorough transformation of oral tradition in so brief a time, while eyewitnesses were still alive, is highly implausible.

Second, if the appearances had originally been mere visions, it becomes inexplicable why the Gospel writers would develop *physical* resurrection stories at all. For both Jews and Gentiles, the idea of bodily resurrection was either a stumbling block or an absurdity. A visionary resurrection would have been far easier to accept. Some critics have suggested that anti-Docetic motives (a desire to oppose those who denied Jesus' real humanity) could have led to the invention of physical appearances. Yet this theory lacks merit: early Docetists did not, in fact, teach purely visionary resurrections, and the Gospel narratives show no systematic anti-Docetic agenda. Moreover, the traditions underlying these accounts predate Docetism entirely.

Ultimately, the only real reason for denying the physical, corporeal nature of Jesus' post-mortem appearances is *philosophical*, not *historical*. Such appearances would constitute miracles of the highest order, and many critics simply reject that possibility on principle. But in that case, one must revisit the earlier questions concerning the existence of God and the plausibility of miracles. Many New Testament scholars, untrained in philosophy, overlook this underlying issue. On the basis of these lines of evidence, we may conclude that the post-mortem appearances of Jesus—to individuals and groups, under diverse circumstances—are firmly established as historical facts. Moreover, these appearances were *bodily* and *physical* in nature. The remaining question, then, is how such appearances are to be explained.

6. The Origin of the Christian Faith

Even the most skeptical New Testament scholars acknowledge that the earliest disciples were at least genuinely *convinced* that Jesus had risen from the dead. The counter-proposal—occasionally suggested by critics—that these same disciples privately recanted under duress is almost universally dismissed in contemporary scholarship. No ancient source, including those hostile to Christianity such as Josephus, Celsus, or Porphyry, records even a hint of such a recantation. In fact, a single documented lapse would have furnished Roman or Jewish authorities with an exceptionally potent means of discrediting the young Christian movement, yet no such exploitation is ever reported. Nor is it plausible to imagine a secret or isolated recantation: interrogations and confessions in this period were routinely conducted before multiple witnesses, as seen in early examples like Stephen's martyrdom in Acts 7. Indeed, it is the very *nature* of the disciples' belief which has long puzzled scholars. One need only consider their conviction that Jesus was the Messiah.

Within Jewish expectation, there was no category for a Messiah who would suffer defeat, humiliation, and execution at the hands of Israel's enemies. The Messiah was envisioned as a triumphant figure who would vanquish Israel's foes, command the allegiance of Jew and Gentile alike, and establish the throne of David in Jerusalem. A Messiah who failed to deliver and instead was crucified as a criminal was a contradiction in terms. As N. T. Wright stresses: *"The crucifixion of Jesus, understood from the point of view of any onlooker, whether sympathetic or not, was bound to have appeared as the complete destruction of any messianic pretensions or possibilities he or his followers might have hinted at."*[159] The crucifixion was nothing less than a devastating catastrophe for the disciples' hopes.

Yet belief in Jesus' resurrection utterly reversed the disaster of the cross. Because God had raised Jesus from the dead, he was vindicated as Messiah after all. As Peter proclaims in Acts 2:32, 36 (RSV): *"This Jesus God raised up. . . . Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified."* It was the resurrection that made possible the disciples' confession of Jesus as Messiah and Lord.

It is therefore no surprise that belief in Jesus' resurrection was universal in the early church. Helmut Koester points out that the traditional formula Paul quotes in 1 Corinthians 15:3–7—summarizing the gospel as Christ's death, burial, resurrection, and appearances—makes it overwhelmingly probable that this understanding of the gospel goes back to the very beginnings of the Jerusalem church. As Koester observes: *"What Paul preached was never the subject of controversy between Paul's Gentile mission and the church in Jerusalem. Jesus' death and resurrection was the event upon which their common proclamation was based."*[160]

Some have speculated whether there may have been early Christian communities that preached only the sayings of Q without reference to Jesus' passion or resurrection. But John Meier rejects this as baseless: the only two Q-using communities we know of—those of Matthew and Luke—both valued and preserved the passion tradition. Meier concludes: *"The idea that some first-generation Christian community proclaimed the sayings of Q without any . . . interest in Jesus' death*

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[159] Wright, *Christian Origins*, 3:557–58.
[160] Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (London: SCM, 1990), 51.

and resurrection is simply not verified by the data. . . ."[161] Günther Bornkamm likewise emphasizes: *"The Easter faith of the first disciples . . . was not the peculiar experience of a few enthusiasts or a peculiar theological opinion of a few apostles, who in the course of time had the luck to prevail. No, they were all one in the belief and the confession to the Risen One."*[162]

Some critics, following Rudolf Bultmann, have sought to blunt this conclusion by claiming that the earliest Christians did not distinguish between Jesus' resurrection and his ascension. According to this view, the primitive proclamation was not of resurrection at all, but simply of Jesus' exaltation into heaven—a belief which later developed into the doctrine of resurrection and ascension. But N. T. Wright has exposed the weakness of this proposal:

"The idea that there was originally no difference for the earliest Christians between resurrection and exaltation/ascension is a twentieth-century fiction, based on a misreading of Paul. Actually, Bultmann's account is slippery at the crucial point: though he says there was no difference between resurrection and ascension, what he means is that there was no early belief in 'resurrection' at all, since . . . the word 'resurrection' and its cognates was not used to denote a non-bodily extension of life in a heavenly realm, however glorious. Plenty of words existed to denote heavenly exaltation; 'resurrection' is never one of them. . . . Bultmann therefore has to postulate—though he has covered up this large move—that at some point halfway through the first century someone who had previously believed that Jesus had simply 'gone to heaven when he died' began to use, to denote this belief, language which had never meant that before and continued not to mean it in either paganism, Judaism, or Christianity thereafter, namely, the language of resurrection. . . . What is more, Bultmann has to assume that, though this theory about a risen body was a new thing within the already widely diverse Christian church, it took over almost at once, so that all traces of the original view—that Jesus was not raised from the dead, but simply 'went to heaven,' albeit in an exalted capacity—have dropped out of historical sight."[163]

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[161] John Meier, "Dividing Lines in Jesus Research Today," *Interpretation* 50 (1996), 359.
[162] Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus von Nazareth*, 8th ed. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1968), 159.
[163] Wright, Christian Origins, 3:625-6.

Given the extremely early date of the resurrection tradition Paul cites in 1 Corinthians 15:3–5—within just a few years of the crucifixion—Bultmann's hypothesis collapses into something resembling a conspiracy theory, a move comparable to the rationalist speculations of eighteenth-century Deism. The historical evidence shows that *resurrection*—not mere exaltation—was the primitive Christian belief. Resurrection entails exaltation and, since Jesus was no longer physically present, also implies ascension; but the reverse move—from exaltation alone to resurrection and ascension—does not follow.

Nor is it historically plausible to suggest that the earliest Christians initially believed only that Jesus had been merely *resuscitated*, and that this belief gradually developed into the later doctrine of resurrection. Although such proposals occasionally appeared in earlier phases of critical scholarship, they are now widely regarded as untenable. Contemporary New Testament scholarship overwhelmingly recognizes that the earliest Christian sources already employ the established Jewish concept of **resurrection**, not the idea of a temporary return to ordinary mortal life.

To see why, it is important to examine the language used in the earliest strata of Christian tradition. One of the most important texts in this regard is the pre-Pauline creedal formulation preserved in First Epistle to the Corinthians 15:3–5, which most scholars agree predates Paul's letter and was likely circulating within the earliest Christian communities only a few years after Jesus' death. In this creed Paul reports that "Christ died for our sins…that he was buried, and that he has been raised on the third day." The verb used here is ἐγήγερται (egegertai), the perfect passive form of *egeirō*, meaning "to raise" or "to awaken." Crucially, the perfect tense indicates a completed action with continuing results: the claim is not simply that Jesus was momentarily revived but that he has been raised and *remains in the state resulting from that act.*

Even more significant is the way Paul himself immediately interprets this language within the same chapter. In the argument that follows, Paul explicitly connects the claim that "Christ has been raised" (*egegertai*) with the Jewish doctrine of "resurrection of the dead" (*ἀνάστασις νεκρῶν — anastasis nekrōn*). In his First Epistle to the Corinthians 15:12–13, Paul writes: "Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead (*ek nekrōn egegertai*), how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead (*anastasis nekrōn*)? But if there is no resurrection of the dead (*anastasis nekrōn*), then Christ has not

been raised." The logical force of Paul's argument depends precisely on the equivalence between the two expressions. For Paul, the claim that Jesus "has been raised from the dead" is not a different or weaker category than resurrection; it is an instance of the general resurrection of the dead anticipated within Jewish eschatological hope.

This connection is decisive for understanding the meaning of the earliest Christian proclamation. Paul's argument would make no sense if the earliest Christian claim were merely that Jesus had been resuscitated. A temporary restoration to mortal life—analogous to stories such as the raising of Lazarus—would not constitute an instance of the eschatological resurrection of the dead, nor would it logically entail the future resurrection of believers. Paul's reasoning presupposes that the same category is in view in both cases: Christ's rising is understood as the *first occurrence* of the general resurrection anticipated by Jewish eschatology.

This interpretation is reinforced by the broader linguistic and conceptual context of Second Temple Judaism. By the first century, the phrase *anastasis nekrōn* ("resurrection of the dead") had acquired a fairly specific meaning: it referred to God's decisive act of raising the dead into a transformed and imperishable mode of embodied life at the culmination of history. This concept appears in several Jewish texts, including Book of Daniel 12:2 and later Jewish literature reflecting similar eschatological expectations. Within this framework, resurrection was not understood as a mere return to ordinary biological life but as a new and glorified mode of existence beyond the power of death.

Consequently, if the earliest Christians had intended to claim that Jesus had simply been revived and resumed his previous earthly life, the terminology they consistently employed would have been both misleading and conceptually inappropriate. Jewish thought already possessed categories for describing restorations to ordinary life, such as the prophetic revivals reported in the Hebrew Scriptures—for example, the raising of the widow's son by Elijah in First Book of Kings 17 or the restoration of the Shunammite's son by Elisha in Second Book of Kings 4. These events were understood as returns to mortal life within the present age. By contrast, the language used by the earliest Christians consistently reflects the much more radical concept of *resurrection.*

Moreover, the same terminology appears across multiple independent strands of early Christian tradition. Expressions referring to Jesus as "raised from the dead" (*egegertai ek nekrōn*) or as having undergone "resurrection from the dead" (*anastasis ek nekrōn*) recur throughout the earliest preaching recorded in the New Testament. This convergence across distinct sources strongly suggests that resurrection language belonged to the earliest layer of Christian proclamation, rather than representing a later theological reinterpretation.

For these reasons, the proposal that belief in Jesus' resurrection evolved from an earlier belief in mere resuscitation faces substantial historical difficulties. The earliest recoverable sources already employ the established Jewish concept of resurrection and explicitly connect Jesus' rising with the broader expectation of the resurrection of the dead. Far from representing a later doctrinal development, the claim that God had raised Jesus from the dead in the full eschatological sense appears to have stood at the very center of the earliest Christian proclamation from the beginning.

Thus, the very origin of Christianity itself depends on the earliest disciples' belief that God had raised Jesus from the dead. And the pressing question is: *how do we explain the origin of that belief?* As R.H. Fuller admits, even the most skeptical critic must posit some mysterious "X" to account for the rise of the Christian movement.[164] But what was that X?

If one denies that the resurrection itself was the mysterious *X* that explains the rise of Christianity, then one must explain the disciples' belief as the result of either (1) Christian influences, (2) pagan influences, or (3) Jewish influences. Let us consider these in order.

Not from Christian Influences

Clearly, the disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection cannot be explained as the product of "Christian influences." Quite simply, there was no Christianity yet. The conviction that Jesus had been raised from the dead was itself the foundation of Christianity. To attempt to explain that belief as a later product of Christianity is circular and incoherent.

[164] R. H. Fuller, The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives (London: SPCK, 1972), 2.

Not from Pagan Influences

Could belief in the resurrection have been derived from pagan mythology? Around the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, at the height of the History of Religions school, scholars eagerly drew parallels between Christian belief and myths from other religions, suggesting that the resurrection faith might have been borrowed.

But this movement collapsed under closer scrutiny, for two main reasons:

1. **The alleged parallels proved spurious.**
   The ancient Mediterranean was indeed full of myths of gods and heroes, but responsible comparative study requires careful sensitivity to both similarities and differences. Those who pointed to "parallels" often ignored the differences, resulting in distortion and confusion. Upon closer examination, most examples turned out to be quite unlike the Christian resurrection claim:
   - Many were **apotheosis stories**, where a hero is divinized and assumed into heaven (e.g., Hercules, Romulus).
   - Others were **disappearance stories**, where the hero vanishes into a higher realm (e.g., Apollonius of Tyana, Empedocles).
   - Still others were **seasonal myths**, symbols of agricultural cycles in which vegetation "dies" in the dry season and "returns" in the rainy season (e.g., Tammuz, Osiris, Adonis).
   - Some were even **political expressions** of emperor worship (e.g., Julius Caesar, Augustus).

None of these corresponds to the Jewish conception of the *resurrection of the dead*. David Aune, a leading expert in ancient Near Eastern literature, concludes flatly: *"No parallel to them [resurrection traditions] is found in Graeco-Roman biography."*[165]

In fact, most scholars now doubt whether myths of "dying and rising gods" ever really existed in the way earlier scholars imagined. For

[165] D. E. Aune, "The Genre of the Gospels," in *Gospel Perspectives II*, ed. R. T. France and David Wenham (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), 48.

example, in the Osiris myth—often cited as a prototype—Osiris never truly returns to life; he simply continues to exist in the underworld. In a recent reassessment, T. N. D. Mettinger explains: *"From the 1930s . . . a consensus has developed to the effect that the 'dying and rising gods' died but did not return or rise to live again. . . . Those who still think differently are looked upon as residual members of an almost extinct species."*

Mettinger himself grants that myths of dying and rising may exist in figures like Dumuzi, Baal, and Melqart—but he emphasizes that these are utterly unlike the early Christian proclamation of Jesus' resurrection:

"The dying and rising gods were closely related to the seasonal cycle. Their death and return were seen as reflected in the changes of plant life. The death and resurrection of Jesus is a one-time event, not repeated, and unrelated to seasonal changes. . . . There is, as far as I am aware, no prima facie evidence that the death and resurrection of Jesus is a mythological construct, drawing on the myths and rites of the dying and rising gods of the surrounding world. While studied with profit against the background of Jewish resurrection belief, the faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus retains its unique character in the history of religions. The riddle remains."[166]

Mettinger's conclusion underscores what has become one of the major shifts in New Testament scholarship over the last century: the "Jewish reclamation of Jesus." As Craig Evans has observed, scholars now recognize that pagan mythology is the wrong interpretive backdrop for understanding Jesus and the earliest disciples. Jesus and his followers were first-century Palestinian Jews, and it is within that framework—not pagan myth—that their beliefs must be explained.[167]

2. **There is no causal link between pagan myths and the disciples' resurrection belief.**
   Jews of the period were certainly aware of seasonal deities and agricultural myths (cf. Ezek. 37:1–14), but they regarded them

[166] Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, The Riddle of Resurrection: "Dying and Rising Gods" in the Ancient Near East (Stockholm, Sweden: Almquist & Wiksell International, 2001), 221

[167] See Craig A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 47–78, and *Jesus and His World: The Archaeological Evidence* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 1–24.

> as idolatrous and abhorrent. As Gerhard Kittel observed, there is *no trace* of cults of dying and rising gods in first-century Palestine.[168]

Moreover, as Hans Grass put it, it would be "completely unthinkable" that devout Jewish disciples of Jesus would have come to sincerely believe in his bodily resurrection on the basis of pagan myths about vegetation cycles or seasonal deities.[169]

Not from Jewish Influences

The final possibility is that the disciples' belief in the resurrection arose from Jewish influences. But here again the answer must be no. To see why, we need to recall what the Jewish conception of resurrection was in the first century.

The idea of the resurrection of the dead is explicitly mentioned three times in the Old Testament: Isaiah 26:19, Ezekiel 37, and Daniel 12:2. During the intertestamental period, this hope became widespread, embraced in Jesus' day by the Pharisees (though denied by the Sadducees). Thus, belief in resurrection was hardly novel; it was a central Jewish conviction.

But the Jewish conception of resurrection differed in two fundamental ways from the Christian proclamation of Jesus' resurrection:

1. Resurrection was always an end-time event.
In Jewish thought, resurrection occurred at the end of history, not within history. Joachim Jeremias underscores the point:

"Ancient Judaism did not know of an anticipated resurrection as an event of history. Nowhere does one find in the literature anything comparable to the resurrection of Jesus. Certainly resurrections of the

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[168] Gerhard Kittel, "Die Auferstehung Jesu," *Deutsche Theologie* 4 (1937): 133–68. In fact Hengel thinks that the belief in the resurrection of the dead served as retardant to the influence of the pagan mystery religions: "The development of the apocalyptic resurrection-, immortality-, and judgment-doctrine in Jewish Palestine explains why—in contrast to Alexandrian Judaism—the Hellenistic mystery religions . . . could gain virtually no influence there" (Martin Hengel, "*Judentum und Hellenismus*," Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 10 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1969], 368–69).
[169] Grass, *Ostergeschehen*, 133.

dead were known, but these always concerned resuscitations, the return to earthly life. In no place in the late Judaic literature does it concern a resurrection to doxa [glory] as an event of history."[170]

For Jews, resurrection belonged only to the great Day of the Lord. There was no concept of an isolated resurrection within history. We see this mindset in John 11:23–24, when Jesus assures Martha that her brother will rise again: *"Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.'"* She had no conception of a resurrection prior to the eschaton.

This also explains why the disciples struggled to understand Jesus' own predictions of his resurrection. In Mark 9:9–11 (ESV), after the transfiguration, Jesus told them not to speak of what they had seen until *"the Son of Man had risen from the dead."* But they puzzled among themselves, asking: *"What does this rising from the dead mean? And why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?"* The disciples interpreted Jesus' words in light of the Jewish expectation that Elijah would return immediately before the end of history, at which point all the dead would be raised. They could not conceive of a resurrection occurring within history, and so his predictions only confused them. After Jesus' crucifixion, therefore, their natural response would not have been to conclude that he was already raised, but rather to look forward to the general resurrection at the last day, preserving his tomb as a shrine until then.

2. Resurrection was always corporate, never individual.
In Jewish thought, the resurrection was always the resurrection of *all the righteous* (or even all humanity) at once. There was no notion of a single individual being raised in isolation, prior to the general resurrection. Ulrich Wilckens explains:

"For nowhere do the Jewish texts speak of the resurrection of an individual which already occurs before the resurrection of the righteous in the end time and is differentiated and separate from it; nowhere does the participation of the righteous in the salvation at the

[170] Joachim Jeremias, "Die älteste Schicht der Osteruberlieferung," in Resurrexit, ed. Edouard Dhanis (Rome: Editrice Libreria Vaticana, 1974), 194

end time depend on their belonging to the Messiah, who was raised in advance as 'First of those raised by God' (1 Cor. 15:20)."[171]

As Wilckens notes, there was no expectation that Messiah himself would rise in advance of the general resurrection. Indeed, there was *no belief at all* in a resurrected Messiah. As N. T. Wright insists:

"All the followers of those first-century messianic movements were fanatically committed to the cause. . . . But in no case right across the century before Jesus and the century after him do we hear of any Jewish group saying that their executed leader had been raised from the dead, and he really was the Messiah after all."[172]

If the disciples had still believed Jesus to be the Messiah after his crucifixion, this might have led them to rethink what "Messiah" meant. But it would not have led them to proclaim that he had been raised from the dead. No Second Temple Jewish texts envision such a scenario. Nobody would have said: *"I believe that so-and-so was the Messiah; therefore, he must have been raised from the dead."*

Thus, given the Jewish framework, after Jesus' execution the disciples' only option would have been to mourn and wait for the end-time resurrection, not to declare that it had already begun with him.

For these two reasons—the end-time setting of resurrection in Judaism and its corporate nature—we cannot explain the disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection as the product of Jewish influences. As N. T. Wright concludes, only a "sufficient explanation" can account for these two radical and unprecedented "mutations" of Jewish resurrection belief within early Christianity. Left to themselves, the disciples would never have come to believe that Jesus had already been raised.

However, some skeptics, such as Alex O'Connor, have suggested that perhaps the disciples did not truly die for their faith, and that the evidential force of their costly sincerity is therefore overstated. Yet this objection quickly collapses under the weight of the historical record. Upon closer examination, the consensus among modern New Testament historians remains firm: several of the earliest leaders of the

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[171] Ulrich Wilckens, "Auferstehung," Themen der Theologie 4 (Stuttgart: Kreuz Verlag, 1970), 131.
[172] N. T. Wright, lecture at Asbury College and Seminary, 1999.

Christian movement are widely acknowledged to have sealed their testimony through martyrdom, persuaded to the end that they had seen the risen Jesus. The martyrdoms of Peter and Paul in Rome under Nero, James the son of Zebedee in Jerusalem, and James the brother of Jesus are exceptionally well attested by early, independent, and convergent sources—for instance, Josephus's *Antiquities* (20.9.1), 1 Clement 5 and Ignatius's *Letter to the Romans*, and Acts 12. To these, many scholars add Stephen, whose death is recorded in Acts 7, and often Thomas, whose martyrdom somewhere near India is attested by early tradition and considered plausible though less certain.

As E. P. Sanders observes, "That Jesus' followers (and later Paul) had experiences of the risen Jesus is, in my judgment, a fact. What the reality was that gave rise to the experiences I do not know."[173] Modern scholars as diverse as Bart Ehrman, Sean McDowell, and Larry Hurtado concur that, whatever one makes of the resurrection itself, these individuals sincerely believed their message to the point of enduring persecution and death. Thus, even on the most skeptical readings, the earliest witnesses were not merely proclaiming what they hoped to be true, but what they were fully convinced they had seen—an historical datum whose explanatory power remains difficult to overstate.

Crucially, this willingness to die for a belief they claimed to have verified by firsthand experience stands in stark contrast to those who die for convictions received secondhand—such as modern terrorists or zealots who act on inherited ideologies or traditions. The disciples were not dying for a theology they had been taught, but for a testimony they themselves professed to have *seen and touched*. Their readiness to face execution was therefore not grounded in dogmatic fervor, but in perceived empirical certainty—a unique kind of martyrdom that, as historians recognize, renders the sincerity of their conviction virtually beyond dispute.

7. The Conversion of James

One of the most remarkable post-resurrection appearances and conversions is that of James, the younger brother of Jesus. What makes this extraordinary is that, according to the Gospels, James and his brothers did not believe in Jesus during his earthly ministry (Mark 3:21,

[173] E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 279.

31–35; John 7:1–10). They rejected his claims, not regarding him as the Messiah, a prophet, or even anyone of significance. By the criterion of embarrassment, this unbelief is almost certainly a genuine historical detail of Jesus' life. Yet after the resurrection, we find Jesus' brothers among the believers gathered in the upper room at Jerusalem (Acts 1:14). The next time James surfaces is in Acts 12:17, during the account of Peter's miraculous release from prison. Peter's instruction is telling: "Report this to James."

Paul provides further insight in Galatians 1:19, recalling his visit to Jerusalem about three years after his Damascus Road encounter. He notes that apart from Peter, "I saw none of the other apostles *except James* the Lord's brother." This indicates that James was already being regarded as an apostle. When Paul returned to Jerusalem fourteen years later, he described the three "pillars" of the church as Peter, John, and *James* (Gal. 2:9). Later, in Acts 21:18, James appears as the sole leader of the Jerusalem church, presiding over its council of elders. The New Testament records nothing further about him, but Josephus, the Jewish historian, reports that James was unlawfully executed by stoning at the hands of the Sanhedrin sometime after A.D. 60, because of his faith in Christ (Antiquities of the Jews 20.200). Moreover, James was not alone in his conversion: Jesus' other brothers also came to faith and became active in Christian ministry. Paul even alludes to this in 1 Corinthians 9:5 (RSV): "Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a wife, as the other apostles and *the brothers of the Lord* and Cephas?"

How are we to understand this dramatic change? On the one hand, the evidence is clear that Jesus' siblings were skeptical during his lifetime. On the other, it is equally clear that they later became fervent followers, with James himself martyred for his confession of faith. Jesus' crucifixion would only have reinforced James's conviction that his brother's messianic claims were delusory. Many of us have brothers—what would it take to persuade you that your brother was the Lord, and to die for that conviction, as James ultimately did? Even the critical New Testament scholar Hans Grass concedes that James's conversion stands as one of the strongest evidences for the resurrection of Jesus Christ.[174]

[174] Hans Grass, Ostergeschehen und Osterberichte, 4th ed. (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974), 80.

8. The Conversion of Paul

The final recorded appearance and conversion is no less extraordinary than the one to James. As Paul himself declares, "Last of all… he appeared to me also." The dramatic encounter of Saul of Tarsus—later known as Paul—on the road to Damascus is first recounted in Acts 9:1–9 and then retold twice more in the book of Acts. That something truly happened on this occasion is confirmed beyond question by Paul's own repeated references to it in his letters. This experience utterly transformed Saul's life. Prior to it, he was a rabbi, a Pharisee, and a respected figure within Judaism. Fiercely opposed to what he considered the dangerous heresy of the Christians, he devoted himself to destroying the movement, even participating in the *execution* of its adherents.

Then, in a single moment, everything changed. He relinquished his standing as a prominent Jewish authority and embraced the very faith he had once tried to extinguish. From then on, he lived as a missionary of Christ—a life marked not by prestige but by poverty, relentless toil, and constant suffering. Paul endured floggings, beatings, stonings (once left for dead), three shipwrecks, and continual exposure to danger, want, and deep anxiety. Ultimately, he sealed his testimony with martyrdom in Rome. And what lay behind such a radical reversal? Paul himself gives the reason: on that fateful day outside Damascus, he encountered "Jesus our Lord" (1 Cor. 9:1). Even critics like Lüdemann affirm the reality of Paul's experience: *"Paul's conversion is not to be denied; it is a historical fact."* (*What Really Happened to Jesus?*, 1995).

The Minimal Facts, in total, may thus be listed as follows:

1. Jesus existed.
2. Jesus believed he had a unique, eschatological relationship with God, possibly as his son.
3. Jesus met his death by Roman crucifixion and was subsequently buried by Joseph of Arimathea in a tomb.
4. On the Sunday morning after his crucifixion, Jesus' tomb was found empty by a group of his women followers.
5. Thereafter, different individuals and groups of people, at different times, places, and circumstances, had multimodal experiences of appearances of Jesus alive after his death.

6. The disciples, among other individuals, came to suddenly and sincerely believe that God had raised Jesus from the dead, to the extent that some of them were willing to die for the truth of that belief.
7. The conversion of James, a former skeptic.
8. The conversion of Paul, formerly an ardent persecutor of Christians.

One of the most striking conclusions that emerged from my study of the historical evidence for Jesus' resurrection was the extent to which such key facts enjoy broad, *majority* support within contemporary New Testament scholarship. The facts discussed here—Jesus' crucifixion, burial, the discovery of the empty tomb, the post-mortem experiences, the origin of the Christian Way, and the conversions of James and Paul—are widely regarded as historically well supported, even among scholars who do not accept the resurrection as the best explanation of them. The principal point of disagreement among scholars does not concern whether the disciples had experiences that they interpreted as appearances of the risen Jesus, but rather how those experiences should be understood—whether as genuine encounters with a resurrected Jesus or as visionary or otherwise non-physical experiences. Nevertheless, the current state of scholarship provides substantial support for the facts themselves as historical data points that call for explanation.

Importantly, these conclusions are not confined to conservative or evangelical scholarship. Rather, they are frequently acknowledged within *mainstream historical studies* of the New Testament.[175] A significant majority of scholars who have published on the subject accept that Jesus was buried and that his tomb was later discovered empty. There is remarkably widespread agreement that the earliest

[175] See Gary R. Habermas, "Resurrection Research from 1975 to the Present: What Are Critical Scholars Saying?" *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 3, no. 2 (2005): 135–53; N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 3 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003); Dale C. Allison Jr., *The Resurrection of Jesus: Apologetics, Polemics, History* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2021); Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (New York: HarperOne, 2014); Gerd Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Jesus: History, Experience, Theology*, trans. John Bowden, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994); E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 1995); and Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020).

disciples had experiences which they believed to be appearances of the risen Jesus. In addition, there is near-universal agreement that the earliest Christians at least believed that God had raised Jesus from the dead and that this belief lay at the center of the earliest Christian proclamation. Scholars may dispute how these beliefs arose, but few deny that they existed and played a foundational role in the emergence of the Christian movement.

It is also important to note that the historical credibility of these facts is not undermined by discrepancies in the Gospel narratives. Such variations are precisely what historians expect when dealing with multiple independent sources recounting the same events. Minor differences in secondary details do not invalidate the core historical claims. Indeed, historians frequently regard the presence of such variations as evidence that the sources were not the result of later editorial harmonization. If historians were to reject sources simply because they contained differences in peripheral details, a great deal of ancient historical knowledge—including much of what we know about the Greco-Roman world—would have to be discarded. This would be methodologically unreasonable.

Moreover, in the case of the Gospels, the discrepancies occur not within a single document but between *independent* accounts. The existence of differences between independent sources does not entail that the central event they report did not occur. At most, it indicates that the sources preserve different perspectives or memories regarding secondary circumstances. What matters for historical analysis is whether the core events themselves are multiply attested and supported by the available evidence.

In fact, the Gospels exhibit a remarkable degree of agreement concerning the central outline of the events surrounding Jesus' death and the subsequent experiences of his followers. All four Gospels report that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified in Jerusalem under Roman authority during the governorship of Pontius Pilate, following charges brought against him by certain Jewish authorities. They agree that he died by crucifixion and that he was buried, with the burial being associated with Joseph of Arimathea. They further report that women followers of Jesus—including Mary Magdalene—visited the tomb early on the first day of the week and found it empty. Finally, they recount that Jesus' followers soon afterward experienced appearances which they interpreted as encounters with him alive after his death,

experiences that transformed them into proclaimers of the message that God had raised him from the dead.

Many additional details are reported by multiple Gospel accounts as well, if we allow for three out of four to count. The cumulative effect of these converging traditions is to establish a basic historical framework that is widely recognized by scholars, even though interpretations of the events themselves remain disputed. The remaining question, therefore, is not whether these core facts occurred, but how they are best explained.

It must be stressed that my purpose here is not to defend or re-establish these eight minimal facts in exhaustive detail. They have already been established through decades of rigorous historical inquiry and are widely recognized in contemporary New Testament criticism. My task is not to rehash every argument or survey every piece of evidence, but to note that the consensus exists and to demonstrate how these facts, once acknowledged, press us toward a serious consideration of the resurrection hypothesis.

Readers who wish to explore the historical grounding of these facts in greater depth are invited to consult the work of leading scholars across the spectrum of belief.[176] Gary Habermas has produced the most comprehensive survey of scholarly opinion, spanning more than 3,400 publications over the last half-century, in *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (2003) and numerous journal articles. William Lane Craig's *The Son Rises* (1981) and *Reasonable Faith* (3rd ed., 2008) provide careful philosophical and historical argumentation for the resurrection. N. T. Wright's magisterial *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (2003) situates the Easter claim in its Jewish and Greco-Roman context with unparalleled historical depth.

For more skeptical treatments that nonetheless affirm many of the same facts, see Bart D. Ehrman's *How Jesus Became God* (2014), E. P. Sanders' *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (1993), and James D. G. Dunn's *Jesus Remembered* (2003). On the appearances of Jesus and their psychological plausibility, Gerd Lüdemann's *What Really Happened to Jesus?* (1995) is an important resource, as is Dale Allison's nuanced study *Resurrecting Jesus* (2005). On Acts and the

[176] Additionally, there is a very brief exposition of the Minimal Facts in the Appendix (Part A).

credibility of Luke as a historian, Colin Hemer's *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (1989) remains a standard reference. Finally, Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (2006) provides an in-depth exploration of how eyewitness testimony undergirds much of the Gospel tradition.

Together, these works provide ample demonstration that the minimal facts are not speculative or sectarian assertions, but the fruit of broad scholarly engagement across confessional lines. It is on *this* foundation that we *now* proceed to consider the criteria for evaluating competing explanations for these facts, and to ask what best accounts for the extraordinary origins of the Christian movement.

Having surveyed the minimal facts that enjoy broad scholarly consensus, the next task is to ask: *What best explains these data?* In historical reasoning, as in the sciences, the goal is not absolute certainty but the selection of the explanation that most adequately accounts for the evidence. The methodological framework for this is known as **Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE)**, or sometimes "abduction," a concept developed by philosopher C. S. Peirce and refined in contemporary philosophy of science and history (see Gilbert Harman, *The Inference to the Best Explanation*, 1965; Peter Lipton, *Inference to the Best Explanation*, 2nd ed., 2004).

In applying IBE, historians weigh competing hypotheses according to certain criteria. The hypothesis that best meets these criteria is the one that should be judged as providing the most rational explanation of the facts.[177] Following standard formulations (e.g., C. Behan McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Descriptions*, 1984), six criteria are especially relevant:

[177] For a deeper analysis of abductive/IBE reasoning, see Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol. 5, *Pragmatism and Pragmaticism*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1974), §§ 171–189; Gilbert H. Harman, "The Inference to the Best Explanation," *The Philosophical Review* 74, no. 1 (1965): 88–95; Peter Lipton, *Inference to the Best Explanation*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004); C. Behan McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Descriptions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Paul R. Thagard, "The Best Explanation: Criteria for Theory Choice," *Journal of Philosophy* 75, no. 2 (1978): 76–92; and Ilkka Niiniluoto, "Defending Abduction," *Philosophy of Science* 66, no. 3, suppl. (1999): S436–S451.

1. Explanatory Scope
The best explanation accounts for *more* of the relevant evidence than its rivals. A hypothesis that can explain all of the most important minimal facts—Jesus' self-understanding, crucifixion, burial, empty tomb, post-mortem appearances, and the conversions of James and Paul—has greater scope than one that explains only a few.
2. Explanatory Power
Explanatory power concerns how well a hypothesis makes the evidence *probable*. It is not enough simply to "cover" the facts; the hypothesis must make them *expected*. A hypothesis with weak explanatory power might render the facts possible but surprising, whereas one with strong explanatory power makes them intelligible.
3. Plausibility
The best explanation will also be more plausible, meaning it coheres with what we *already* know to be true about the world. Plausibility does not necessarily mean naturalistic reductionism, but rather whether a hypothesis fits within broader, well-established background knowledge. If the Necessary Mind deduced in Part I exists, then this will also be crucial background information to consider.
4. Less Contrived
The best explanation does not rely on adding assumptions *unsupported* by independent evidence. Hypotheses requiring a web of unlikely or speculative conditions are more contrived than a simple, unified hypothesis. C. Behan McCullagh emphasizes that a good historical explanation should "introduce few new suppositions, especially ones for which we have no independent evidence" (*Justifying Historical Descriptions*, p. 19).
5. Disconfirmed by Fewer Accepted Beliefs
An adequate explanation should not conflict with well-established background knowledge or other accepted facts.
6. Comparative Superiority
Finally, the best explanation is the one that satisfies criteria (1) through (5) to such a superior degree that there is little chance a rival hypothesis will overtake it upon further scrutiny. In other words, the best explanation does not merely edge out its competitors in one category, but consistently outperforms them *across* the board.

Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE) provides the structured methodology by which historians compare naturalistic hypotheses (hallucination, conspiracy, displacement, swoon) against the Resurrection Hypothesis. The criteria ensure that we are not simply

leaping to conclusions out of prior commitments, but weighing explanations on their historical merits. Let us begin.

The Conspiracy Hypothesis

The Conspiracy Hypothesis is one of the earliest and most intuitive naturalistic explanations of the resurrection. In its classic form, it suggests that Jesus' followers deliberately deceived others: they stole his body from the tomb and fabricated stories of post-mortem appearances. According to this hypothesis, the empty tomb was not the result of divine intervention, but of theft; the resurrection appearances were not genuine experiences, but lies told by conspirators; and the disciples' sudden proclamation that "God has raised Jesus from the dead" was the result of intentional fraud.

This theory is not a modern invention. It first appears in antiquity. Matthew records that the Jewish authorities circulated the story that the disciples stole Jesus' body while the guards slept (Matthew 28:11–15). In the eighteenth century, Enlightenment thinkers such as Hermann Samuel Reimarus revived the idea, suggesting that the disciples invented the resurrection to continue Jesus' movement. For some deists, this theory was attractive because it preserved a naturalistic worldview while still acknowledging Christianity's historical impact. But despite its longevity, the Conspiracy Hypothesis is today *universally abandoned* by professional historians. The reason is clear: when examined against rigorous standards of historical reasoning—in particular, the six criteria of Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE)—the theory collapses.

1. Explanatory Scope

On the surface, the conspiracy hypothesis seems to have broad explanatory scope. It touches on each of the minimal facts: the empty tomb (the disciples stole the body), the resurrection appearances (the disciples lied about seeing Jesus), and the origin of the disciples' belief (a fraud perpetrated on the public). In this respect, it appears at first to be a simple, unified hypothesis.

However, closer inspection reveals its limitations. First, the diversity and distribution of the resurrection appearances are not adequately

covered. Paul records that Jesus appeared to individuals (Peter, James, Paul), small groups (the Twelve and other pockets of apostles), and even to more than five hundred people at once (1 Corinthians 15:3–8). These experiences occurred in different settings, times, and circumstances. To explain this through conspiracy requires supposing that the disciples coordinated an elaborate web of lies across varied contexts, maintaining consistency under scrutiny from opponents, and persuading converts like James and Paul—both originally skeptics. Such a scope is not covered and is implausibly wide for a coordinated deception.

Second, the conspiracy theory fails to account for the transformation of the disciples themselves. The minimal facts establish that the earliest disciples sincerely believed that God had raised Jesus from the dead. They preached this conviction openly, even in Jerusalem, where hostile witnesses could challenge them, and they were willing to suffer persecution and death rather than recant. As the Jewish scholar Pinchas Lapide famously remarked, *"If the defeated and depressed group of disciples overnight could change into a victorious movement of faith, based only on deception or autosuggestion, then that would be a much greater miracle than the resurrection itself."* (Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective*, 1983). Thus, while the conspiracy theory seems at first to cover the evidence, in reality it fails to account adequately for its breadth and depth.

2. Explanatory Power

Explanatory power asks not only whether a hypothesis covers the evidence, but whether it makes the evidence probable. Here the conspiracy theory falters even more.

Consider the empty tomb. If the disciples had stolen Jesus' body, why would they invent a story in which *women* are the first witnesses? In the patriarchal culture of first-century Judaism, women's testimony was considered highly unreliable. If men were fabricating the story, the inclusion of women—especially as the primary witnesses to the empty tomb and even the *first* post-mortem appearance (i.e., from John 20:14-16)—makes no sense at all. Far from strengthening the tale, it weakened it in the eyes of their contemporaries. By contrast, the presence of women witnesses makes perfect sense if the account reflects genuine memory.

Furthermore, the simplicity of the empty tomb narratives undermines the conspiracy theory. If the disciples were fabricating a story, why are the resurrection accounts (especially Mark's) so restrained? Later apocryphal gospels, such as the *Gospel of Peter*, embellish the resurrection with fantastic details: the stone rolls away by itself, Jesus emerges from the tomb as a cosmic giant, flanked by angels, with a talking cross announcing the miracle, all witnessed by a multitude of spectators! Mark's Gospel, by contrast, is strikingly austere. It contains no description of Jesus emerging from the tomb, no triumphant scene of vindication, only the stark announcement of the empty tomb. Neither is the dispute with non-believing Jews well explained. Why isn't Matthew's guard already there in Mark's story? Even in Matthew's story the guard is set too late: the body could have been already stolen before the guard arrived on Saturday morning, so that they would have been guarding, unbeknownst to them, an empty tomb! For a fail-safe alibi against theft of the body, see once more the forged Gospel of Peter, where the guard (explicitly identified as Roman) is set immediately upon interment of the corpse.

The appearance stories present similar problems. A fabricator would likely have described Jesus' appearances in terms of Old Testament theophanies or visions of eschatological resurrection (e.g., Dan. 12:2). But then Christ should appear to the disciples in overwhelming glory. And why not a description of the resurrection itself? If the disciples were inventing all this, why not have Jesus appear to Caiaphas, Pilate, or the villains of the Sanhedrin—just as Jesus had *said*? Then *they* could be branded as the real liars for claiming that Jesus hadn't appeared to them!

Most devastating is the conspiracy theory's inability to account for the disciples' sincere belief. As Bart Ehrman, no apologist, concedes: *"It is a historical fact that some of Jesus' followers came to believe that he had been raised from the dead soon after his execution."* (*How Jesus Became God*, 2014, p. 182). People may die for what they mistakenly believe to be true; they do not willingly die for what they know to be false. The idea that ordinary men and women would suddenly become conspirators and liars who would *willingly* be killed for their deliberate fabrications, without even a *single* recorded recantation in history, is extremely improbable. As William Paley said,

"Would men in such circumstances pretend to have seen what they never saw; assert facts which they had not knowledge of,

go about lying to teach virtue; and, though not only convinced of Christ's being an imposter, but having seen the success of his imposture in his crucifixion, yet persist in carrying on; and so persist, as to bring upon themselves, for nothing, and with full knowledge of the consequence, enmity and hatred, danger and death?"[178]

The question is merely rhetorical, for the absurdity of the hypothesis of deceit is all too clear. The explanatory power of the conspiracy hypothesis is therefore minimal.

3. Plausibility

The Achilles' heel of the conspiracy hypothesis is its implausibility. One might point here to the supposed psychological state of the disciples or the unbelievable complexity of such a conspiracy. But the problem which dwarfs all others is that it is historically anachronistic, projecting later Christian categories back onto the disciples as if they could have conceived of inventing such a story. But in first-century Judaism, the idea of a crucified and resurrected Messiah was unthinkable. We have already seen why, but it is worth repeating.

First, no Jew expected the Messiah to die, let alone to be executed by pagans as a criminal. The Messiah was expected to establish David's throne, defeat Israel's enemies, and restore righteousness. A crucified messiah was, in Jewish eyes, a failed messiah. As N. T. Wright puts it, *"If your favorite Messiah got himself crucified, you had basically two choices: give up the movement, or get yourself a new Messiah."* (*The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 2003, p. 110). Inventing a story of resurrection was not one of the options.

Second, Jewish resurrection belief differed radically from the Christian proclamation. In Judaism, resurrection was collective, occurring at the end of the world, not an isolated event in history. This is why the disciples were perplexed when Jesus spoke of rising again (Mark 9:9–11). They thought he meant the general resurrection at the end of time. Nowhere in Jewish expectation was there a belief that the Messiah alone would be raised in the middle of history. Thus, the disciples had

[178] William Paley, A View of the Evidences of Christianity, 2 vols., 5th ed. (London: R. Faulder, 1796; repr. ed.: Westmead, England: Gregg, 1970), 1:327-28.

neither the conceptual framework nor the theological motivation to invent a resurrection story.

Some skeptics have suggested that pagan myths of dying and rising gods provided inspiration. But this idea, popular in the late nineteenth century, has been thoroughly discredited, as we've seen. Scholars such as T. N. D. Mettinger (*The Riddle of Resurrection*, 2001) and Jonathan Z. Smith (*Drudgery Divine*, 1990) have demonstrated that alleged parallels collapse upon scrutiny. Most so-called "resurrections" in pagan mythology are not resurrections at all: they are either seasonal cycles (e.g., Tammuz, Osiris), heavenly translations (e.g., Hercules, Romulus), or symbolic myths of fertility. As Mettinger concludes: *"There is, as far as I am aware, no prima facie evidence that the death and resurrection of Jesus is a mythological construct, drawing on the myths and rites of the dying and rising gods of the surrounding world."* (Mettinger, p. 221). Moreover, Jews regarded such pagan cults as abhorrent (cf. Ezekiel 8:14–15). The disciples are therefore highly unlikely to have borrowed from them.

Thus, the conspiracy hypothesis fails the plausibility test. It requires us to believe that first-century Jews, who had no concept of an isolated resurrection of a messiah in the middle of history, invented a story utterly foreign to their worldview and unlikely to persuade their peers.

4. Less Contrived

The conspiracy hypothesis is highly contrived. It postulates motives, intentions, and coordinated actions of the disciples for which we have no evidence. Why would a group of fearful men, demoralized by their leader's humiliating death, suddenly conspire to proclaim a hoax? What benefit would they gain? They received no wealth, no power, and no honor—only persecution, imprisonment, and martyrdom. To suppose they devised such a plot, and maintained it without a single known defector, is to multiply assumptions without warrant.

The theory also requires constant patching. How do we explain the conversion of James, who was initially skeptical, or of Paul, an enemy of the church? Did the conspirators recruit them into the lie? Did Paul, who had persecuted Christians, suddenly embrace their fraud? Each objection forces new layers of supposition. As C. Behan McCullagh has shown, hypotheses that require numerous ad hoc additions to survive criticism are historically weak (*Justifying Historical*

Descriptions, 1984, p. 19). By contrast, the resurrection hypothesis explains the data without contrivance.

5. Disconfirmed by Accepted Beliefs

The conspiracy theory is disconfirmed by several well-established background beliefs. First, it conflicts with the consensus that the disciples sincerely believed Jesus had risen. Even skeptics like Gerd Lüdemann affirm: *"It may be taken as historically certain that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus' death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ."* (*What Really Happened to Jesus?*, 1995, p. 38). Second, it contradicts our knowledge of human psychology: large-scale conspiracies, especially those under persecution, tend to unravel quickly. Yet the resurrection proclamation endured, unshaken, for decades. Third, it clashes with Jewish messianic expectations, which gave no conceptual space for a fabricated resurrection claim.

6. Comparative Superiority

Finally, the conspiracy theory is not comparatively superior to rival hypotheses. It fails in scope, power, plausibility, and parsimony. Even other naturalistic explanations, such as the hallucination hypothesis, at least take seriously the disciples' sincerity. The conspiracy theory, by contrast, requires us to believe that Christianity was launched by deliberate fraud—an idea that no serious historian today defends. As Craig notes, *"No scholar would defend the Conspiracy Hypothesis today. The only place you read about such things is in the popular, sensationalist press or in former propaganda from behind the Iron Curtain."* (*Reasonable Faith*, 2008, p. 373). Its abandonment is itself evidence of its inadequacy.

The Apparent Death (or "Swoon") Hypothesis

Another naturalistic attempt to explain away the resurrection is the Apparent Death Hypothesis, sometimes called the "Swoon Theory." This proposal suggests that Jesus did not actually die on the cross but merely lapsed into a state of unconsciousness or near-death. Later, he revived in the tomb, escaped, and convinced his followers that he had risen from the dead. Early forms of this idea go back to the eighteenth

and nineteenth centuries. It was promoted by Enlightenment skeptics such as Karl Bahrdt and later popularized by Friedrich Schleiermacher, as well as rationalist writers who sought to preserve Jesus as a moral teacher while rejecting supernatural resurrection. In the modern era, it has resurfaced in popular, non-scholarly works such as Hugh Schonfield's *The Passover Plot* (1965). Yet among professional historians and New Testament scholars, the hypothesis has been almost entirely abandoned. The reasons become clear when we evaluate it under the six IBE criteria.

1. Explanatory Scope

At first glance, the Apparent Death Hypothesis appears to cover the central facts. It offers a naturalistic explanation for the empty tomb (Jesus revived and left it), the post-mortem appearances (Jesus later appeared alive to his disciples), and the disciples' belief in the resurrection (they mistakenly thought he had conquered death). Like the Conspiracy Hypothesis, it therefore seems to "touch" all the relevant evidence.

But this coverage is deceptive. For one, the hypothesis comes in two forms: conspiratorial and non-conspiratorial. In the conspiratorial version, Jesus colluded with his disciples to fake his death—perhaps using drugs or trickery to appear lifeless. This version, however, is effectively a variant of the Conspiracy Hypothesis and inherits all of its weaknesses: extreme coordination, invention of motives without evidence, and implausibility in a Jewish setting.

In the non-conspiratorial version, Jesus simply survived crucifixion, was mistakenly presumed dead, and revived spontaneously in the tomb. Yet this form faces insurmountable obstacles. How could a severely wounded man, sealed inside a rock-cut tomb with a large stone across its entrance, extricate himself without help? How could he then present himself to his disciples as the triumphant conqueror of death? At best, they would have concluded that he was still alive—not that he had been resurrected to glory. As David Strauss, the nineteenth-century critic of rationalist theories, observed: *"It is impossible that a being who had been half-dead out of weakness, and who then needed immediate medical care, should have been able to give to the disciples the impression that he was the conqueror of death and the prince of life."* (*The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, 1835, p. 412). What about James and Paul? Are we really to believe that Jesus' own brother, plus

an unsympathetic enemy, were also so deeply moved by seeing a nearly dead man?

2. Explanatory Power

Explanatory power asks whether the hypothesis makes the evidence probable. Here the Apparent Death Hypothesis falters badly.

Consider the empty tomb. Even if Jesus survived the crucifixion, how did he leave the tomb? A man who had been scourged to the point of near-death, nailed to a cross, and pierced with a spear would have been in no position to roll back a heavy stone, overpower guards (if present), and walk miles to Galilee. Roman tombs were sealed with stones weighing hundreds of pounds, often requiring several men to move. The idea that a single, gravely wounded man could have accomplished this borders on the fantastic.

The post-mortem appearances are even less explicable. What would the disciples have seen? Not a radiant, glorified Lord, but a battered, bloody man in desperate need of bandages and rest. Such a sight could not have birthed the belief that Jesus had risen immortal and victorious. At most, it would have convinced them he had barely survived execution. Yet the New Testament testimony is not that the disciples believed Jesus had escaped death, but that he had defeated it—that he had been raised in glory. Strauss was right: the condition of a resuscitated, half-dead Jesus would have elicited pity, not worship.

Most critically, the hypothesis cannot explain the origin of the disciples' resurrection faith. Resurrection in Second Temple Judaism was not the *resuscitation* of a dying man but the transformation of the dead into immortal life at the end of the age. If the disciples had encountered a wounded Jesus, they would not have concluded that the general resurrection had begun in him. They would have concluded, instead, that he had barely survived and would eventually die again. The explanatory power of the Apparent Death Hypothesis is therefore negligible.

3. Plausibility

The Apparent Death Hypothesis fails catastrophically on plausibility grounds. Roman crucifixion was designed to ensure death. Executioners were experts in their craft, responsible with their own

lives for the certainty of their victims' deaths. As Martin Hengel's classic study *Crucifixion* (1977) demonstrates, crucifixion was not merely painful but medically fatal. Victims typically died from a combination of asphyxiation, hypovolemic shock, blood loss, and organ failure. Roman practice included measures to guarantee death, such as spear thrusts or leg-breaking to hasten asphyxiation. John 19:34 records that Jesus' side was pierced by a Roman soldier, producing a flow of blood and water—widely understood to indicate a ruptured pericardium or pulmonary edema. Modern medical studies (e.g., Edwards, Gabel, and Hosmer, *JAMA*, 1986) affirm that Jesus' physiological state was utterly incompatible with survival.

Historical evidence reinforces this. Josephus recounts that he once pleaded for the lives of three acquaintances who had been crucified. They were removed from their crosses while still alive and given the best medical care available. Despite this, two of the three died anyway (*Life* 75:420–21). If crucifixion victims removed early, with medical attention, usually perished, how much less plausible is it that Jesus—brutally scourged, nailed to a cross, pierced with a spear, and left without medical care—could have survived, revived in a tomb, and inspired messianic faith? The hypothesis demands what Josephus' testimony shows to be medically and historically impossible.

4. Less Contrived

The Apparent Death Hypothesis quickly becomes contrived. In its conspiratorial form, it requires us to imagine secret societies, carefully administered potions to simulate death, clandestine arrangements between Jesus' followers and members of the Sanhedrin, and other speculative machinations. All of this, however, is unsupported by any evidence in the sources. It is ad hoc reasoning of the worst kind.

Even in its non-conspiratorial form, the theory must invent an improbable sequence of events: (1) Jesus survived crucifixion; (2) he revived spontaneously in the tomb without medical aid; (3) he moved the stone and escaped; (4) he presented himself to his disciples not as a half-dead man but as the glorious conqueror of death; and (5) he then disappeared from history, leaving no further trace. Each step multiplies assumptions without support, making the hypothesis far more complex and fragile than the simple claim of resurrection.

5. Disconfirmed by Accepted Beliefs

The hypothesis is massively disconfirmed by accepted background knowledge. Medical facts about crucifixion demonstrate that survival was essentially impossible. Roman practice ensured victims were dead before burial. Moreover, the unanimous historical tradition indicates that Jesus did not continue to live among his disciples after his death. The appearances were temporary and ended; the proclamation was not "Jesus survived" but "Jesus has been raised." The hypothesis also contradicts what is accepted about the disciples' transformation. Seeing a half-dead Jesus would not have inspired bold proclamation of resurrection, still less willingness to die for it. Instead, it would have led them to keep him hidden and nurse him back to health.

6. Comparative Superiority

Finally, the Apparent Death Hypothesis fails spectacularly when compared with other explanations. It neither matches the explanatory scope of the resurrection hypothesis, nor approaches its power, nor has any plausibility given Roman execution practices. It is enormously contrived, contradicted by medical and historical evidence, and rejected even by skeptical scholars. Indeed, David Strauss—no friend of orthodoxy—was the first to show that the theory is self-defeating, because it reduces the disciples' proclamation of resurrection to a psychological impossibility. For that reason, virtually no New Testament historian today defends it. As Craig Evans remarks, *"The swoon theory is one of those dead hypotheses that simply refuses to die—outside the academy."* (*Jesus and the Ossuaries*, 2003).

The Displaced Body Hypothesis

The **Displaced Body Hypothesis** was proposed in 1922 by the Jewish historian Joseph Klausner in his classic work *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times, and Teaching*. Unlike conspiracy or swoon theories, Klausner's account did not rely on deliberate deception or improbable survival. Instead, he suggested a logistical explanation: because of the lateness of the hour before the Sabbath and the proximity of his own family tomb, Joseph of Arimathea placed Jesus' body temporarily in his personal tomb. Later, he transferred the body to the criminals' common graveyard, where executed men were typically buried. The

disciples, unaware of this transfer, discovered the temporary tomb empty and mistakenly inferred that Jesus had risen.

This theory was attractive to Klausner because it offered a way of explaining the empty tomb without denying Jewish burial customs. It is also one of the very few modern Jewish attempts to deal seriously with the evidence of Jesus' resurrection. However, Klausner's hypothesis has found no enduring support among critical scholars. Today, it is largely forgotten in the academy, although it occasionally resurfaces in popular writing or internet skepticism. The reasons for its rejection become evident when it is measured against the six criteria of Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE).

1. Explanatory Scope

The most immediate problem with the Displaced Body Hypothesis is its **narrow explanatory scope**. It attempts to explain only one element of the evidence: the empty tomb. It does not address the post-mortem appearances of Jesus reported by Paul, the Gospels, and Acts, nor the origin of the disciples' radical conviction that God had raised Jesus bodily from the dead. To account for these additional facts, independent hypotheses must be added. For instance, hallucination theory might be combined with body displacement to explain the appearances, but this multiplies assumptions and diminishes explanatory economy.

Moreover, even with respect to the empty tomb, the scope is partial. The earliest Jewish/Christian polemic was not about *where* Jesus' body was, but *why* the tomb was empty. As William Lane Craig observes, *"Had Joseph displaced the body, the controversy would not have been over why the tomb was empty, but over the location of Jesus' grave."* (*Reasonable Faith*, 2008, p. 367). The hypothesis therefore narrows the scope of explanation so significantly that it cannot seriously compete.

2. Explanatory Power

Even within its narrow scope, the explanatory power of the Displaced Body Hypothesis is weak. If Joseph had moved Jesus' body, he and his servants would have known the body's location. Once the disciples began proclaiming that Jesus had risen, it would have been easy for Joseph—or the Jewish authorities—to correct the misunderstanding. One could imagine Joseph simply pointing to the criminal graveyard, or

producing evidence of the transfer. The fact that the earliest polemic against the resurrection (attested in Matthew 28:13–15) was that the disciples had stolen the body shows that the Jewish authorities accepted the tomb was empty but did not suggest Joseph had relocated it.

Some defenders of the theory suggest that by the time the disciples began preaching the resurrection, the body would have been unidentifiable. Yet this misunderstands Jewish burial customs. Executed criminals were buried immediately, and even common graves were carefully noted. A year later, Jewish families typically exhumed the bones and placed them in ossuaries, which presupposes that burial sites were remembered. As archaeologist Jodi Magness explains, *"Jewish tombs were never used casually, and even secondary burials of criminals were conducted with respect and care for the remains."* (*Stone and Dung, Oil and Spit*, 2011). Thus, the notion that Jesus' grave would have been forgotten or untraceable does not fit with Jewish practice. The early controversy was not over *locating* a missing corpse but over *explaining* an indisputably empty tomb. This fact undermines the explanatory power of Klausner's hypothesis.

3. Plausibility

The hypothesis is also implausible given what we know about Jewish burial practices. Jewish law required executed criminals to be buried on the day of their death (Deuteronomy 21:22–23; cf. Josephus, *War* 4.317). Archaeological and textual evidence suggests that Jerusalem had a designated place for the burial of criminals, likely very close to the site of execution. Craig estimates it could have been between fifty and six hundred yards away (*Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus*, 1989). If Joseph of Arimathea intended to comply with Jewish law, he could have buried Jesus directly in the criminals' graveyard, without first using his family tomb. The idea of temporarily polluting his own family tomb and then moving the corpse later is inconsistent with Jewish burial sensibilities.

Even more, Jewish law did not even *permit* moving a body once buried, except into a family tomb. To remove Jesus from Joseph's tomb to a common graveyard would have violated halakhic regulations. As Raymond Brown notes, *"Secondary burial was permitted only to transfer remains to the family tomb; otherwise, bodies were left undisturbed."* (*The Death of the Messiah*, 1994, p. 1240). Thus, the plausibility of Joseph engaging in such an irregular act is extremely

low. The simplest and most culturally congruent action would have been immediate burial in the criminals' graveyard, eliminating the need for later displacement.

4. Less Contrived

The Displaced Body Hypothesis becomes contrived when we consider its speculative assumptions. It imputes to Joseph motives and actions for which we have no evidence: that he feared Sabbath timing constraints, that he chose to pollute his own tomb rather than bury Jesus properly in the criminals' graveyard, and that he later moved the body secretly. These suppositions are not attested in any ancient source. The canonical Gospels uniformly describe Joseph as sincerely burying Jesus in his own new tomb (Mark 15:46; Matthew 27:59–60; Luke 23:53; John 19:41–42).

To preserve the theory, additional contrived conjectures must be introduced. For example, one must hypothesize that Joseph and any servants who knew of the displacement suddenly died, or that records of the graveyard were lost, so that no one could correct the disciples' supposed error. Each added conjecture makes the hypothesis increasingly ad hoc.

5. Disconfirmed by Accepted Beliefs

The hypothesis is disconfirmed by what we know of Jewish burial procedures. As noted, executed criminals were buried on the same day, often in designated cemeteries near the place of execution. Secondary removal to a family tomb was permitted, but removal to a criminals' graveyard after temporary placement in a family tomb would have violated custom. Furthermore, all early traditions agree that Joseph provided a sincere burial for Jesus in his own tomb. There is no evidence, in Jewish, Christian, or Roman sources, that Joseph later moved the body. If such an action had occurred, one would expect at least some polemical tradition to reflect it. Instead, the early Jewish polemic focused on theft, not displacement.

6. Comparative Superiority

Finally, the Displaced Body Hypothesis is not comparatively superior to its rivals. It fails to account for the full range of evidence, has weak explanatory power, is implausible in light of Jewish practice, and

becomes contrived under scrutiny. It is therefore unsurprising that no contemporary scholar defends it. Even Klausner's original formulation was criticized almost immediately, and the theory has since disappeared from serious academic discussion. Today it survives only in the writings of popular-level skeptics, often without awareness of its historical and cultural implausibility.

The Wrong Tomb Hypothesis

The **Wrong Tomb Hypothesis** was first proposed in 1907 by the Cambridge scholar Kirsopp Lake in *The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ*. Lake's theory was an attempt to explain the empty tomb without invoking either fraud or miracle. According to him, the women who went to the tomb on Easter morning mistakenly went to the wrong one. In this version of events, the women, still grief-stricken and confused, wandered to an unoccupied tomb in the garden. There they encountered a caretaker who, upon seeing them, remarked something to the effect of: *"You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth. He is not here."* The women, however, misunderstood, became frightened, and fled. Later, after disciples experienced visions of the risen Christ, this misunderstood episode evolved into the full-fledged story of the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb.

Unlike other naturalistic hypotheses, Lake's proposal never gained traction in scholarship. It was almost immediately rejected by critics as implausible and inadequate, and today no serious historian defends it. The reasons for its failure become clear when we assess it under the six criteria of Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE).

1. Explanatory Scope

A good hypothesis must have broad explanatory scope, covering all the minimal facts. The Wrong Tomb Hypothesis fails this test. It attempts to explain the empty tomb, but it says nothing about the resurrection appearances, the transformation of the disciples, the conversion of skeptics like James and Paul, or the rise of the Christian movement. To deal with these other facts, additional independent hypotheses—such as hallucination theory—would need to be combined with the wrong tomb theory. This piecemeal approach lacks coherence and unity.

Even with respect to the empty tomb, the scope of the hypothesis is limited. The earliest Christian-Jewish disputes about the resurrection did not center on the claim that the disciples had gone to the wrong tomb. Rather, they assumed that Jesus' burial site was known, and the dispute was over why that site was empty (Matthew 28:13–15). If the women had simply gone to the wrong place, the controversy would have been over their mistake, and the matter could have been settled quickly. The fact that both Christians and Jews accepted the existence of the empty tomb shows that the wrong tomb theory fails to cover the historical landscape adequately.

2. Explanatory Power

The explanatory power of the Wrong Tomb Hypothesis is exceedingly weak. For one, it does not even attempt to address the post-mortem appearances of Jesus. As with the Displaced Body Hypothesis, this leaves it without explanatory force for two of the most significant minimal facts: the experiences of individuals and groups who were convinced they had encountered the risen Jesus, and the resulting conviction of the disciples that God had raised him.

Even in regard to the empty tomb, the theory is implausible. Suppose the women mistakenly went to the wrong tomb and reported their experience to the disciples. Would this have convinced first-century Jews that Jesus had risen from the dead? Hardly. A vague report from women that a man at a tomb said, *"He is not here,"* would not have generated the radical proclamation of resurrection. First-century Jews would not conclude from an empty tomb—or from confused testimony about one—that resurrection had taken place. Resurrection, in their worldview, was not about misplaced corpses; it was about the eschatological transformation of the dead into immortality at the end of time.

Furthermore, the hypothesis collapses under the problem of verification. After their initial fright, would the women not have retraced their steps by daylight and located the correct tomb? Would not the disciples themselves—many of whom lived in Jerusalem or nearby—have gone to check the burial place? In fact, the Gospels explicitly state that women had observed where Jesus was buried (Mark 15:47), making the idea of a simple mistake less plausible. If the wrong tomb hypothesis were correct, it would have been trivially easy for both the disciples and their Jewish opponents to verify and disprove. Instead,

the historical controversy turned not on mistaken identity of the tomb but on explaining its emptiness.

3. Plausibility

The Wrong Tomb Hypothesis is implausible in light of the evidence we do possess. The Gospels state that Joseph of Arimathea buried Jesus in a new tomb cut out of rock, one near the site of crucifixion (Mark 15:42–47; John 19:41–42). The women are explicitly said to have seen where Jesus was laid (Mark 15:47), so they knew the location. The tomb was not an anonymous or common grave but one belonging to a prominent member of the Sanhedrin, whose position would have made the burial site public knowledge. Thus, it was not only the disciples but also Jewish opponents who would have been aware of its location. As Craig Keener notes: *"It is inconceivable that the earliest Christian proclamation of resurrection, made in Jerusalem itself, could have gained traction if the body's burial place was unknown or mistaken."* (*The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 2009, p. 698).

The early character of the empty tomb tradition further undermines Lake's proposal. Mark's empty tomb narrative, which most scholars regard as pre-Markan in form, is strikingly simple and shows no signs of legendary embellishment. The lack of theological reflection—no scriptural proof-texts, no depiction of the resurrection event itself—suggests it is rooted in early, authentic memory. This early provenance makes it highly implausible that it arose out of a late legendary reinterpretation of a mistaken tomb visit.

4. Less Contrived

Lake's hypothesis is ad hoc in its selectivity. For example, he accepts the tradition that the women went to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body but discounts the equally strong tradition that they saw where he was buried the evening before. Why accept one but not the other? Similarly, he accepts part of the caretaker's supposed message (*"He is not here"*) as authentic but dismisses the rest (*"He is risen!"*) as later Christian proclamation. Yet the entire speech belongs together as a unit. It is methodologically arbitrary to excise half of it while retaining the other half.

Moreover, Lake interprets Mark's "young man" (Mark 16:5) as a human caretaker, but the Greek term (*neaniskos*) is often used of angelic figures, and his white robe is characteristic of Jewish descriptions of angels (cf. Daniel 10:5–6; Acts 1:10). The women's fear and astonishment—another Markan motif—fits better with an angelophany than with a chance encounter with a gardener. Lake's selectivity in treating the tradition introduces unnecessary ad hoc assumptions, making the theory contrived.

5. Disconfirmed by Accepted Beliefs

The Wrong Tomb Hypothesis is contradicted by widely accepted historical facts. Chief among these is that Jesus was buried by Joseph of Arimathea, a figure unlikely to be a Christian invention given his status as a Sanhedrin member (the very body that condemned Jesus). As John A. T. Robinson argued, the burial by Joseph is "one of the earliest and best-attested traditions" (*The Human Face of God*, 1973, p. 131). If Joseph buried Jesus, then the location of the tomb was known. The hypothesis also contradicts the generally accepted early provenance of the empty tomb tradition, which rules out later legendary development. Finally, it fails to account for the polemical context: Jewish opponents did not claim the disciples went to the wrong tomb but instead acknowledged the emptiness and accused the disciples of theft. This demonstrates that the burial site was not in dispute.

6. Comparative Superiority

For a hypothesis to be judged best, it must exceed its rivals across the board. The Wrong Tomb Hypothesis fails miserably here. It has narrow scope, weak power, implausibility in light of burial traditions, contrived selectivity, and conflict with accepted background facts. It does not explain the data as well as the resurrection hypothesis, nor even as well as other failed naturalistic theories like hallucination. As a result, it gained virtually no scholarly following and was "dead almost upon arrival." Today, it survives only in occasional popular or internet discussions, not in serious academic debate.

The Hallucination Hypothesis

The **Hallucination Hypothesis** is among the most serious naturalistic attempts to explain the resurrection appearances. It was first proposed by David Friedrich Strauss in his monumental work *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* (1835). Strauss argued that the disciples did not actually see the risen Jesus but projected subjective visions or hallucinations of him after his death. In modern times, the hypothesis has been most prominently defended by Gerd Lüdemann, the German New Testament critic, who maintains that the resurrection appearances were psychological experiences generated by grief, guilt, and religious expectation (*What Really Happened to Jesus?*, 1995).

Because it does not involve deception or physical survival, the Hallucination Hypothesis has enjoyed more serious discussion in scholarship than theories such as conspiracy or swoon. Yet, when subjected to the rigorous criteria of Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE), it, too, proves inadequate.

1. Explanatory Scope

The explanatory scope of the Hallucination Hypothesis is narrow. First, it says nothing about the empty tomb. If Jesus' body remained in the grave, then hallucinations alone cannot explain why the tomb was found empty. To maintain the theory, one must either deny the historicity of the empty tomb altogether or conjoin another hypothesis (such as displacement or theft) to explain it. Either approach diminishes the simplicity and unity of the explanation.

Second, it does not explain the origin of the disciples' resurrection belief. Hallucinations of a deceased loved one do occur, as psychologists have documented. Studies of bereavement, such as those cited by Tony Walter in *The Eclipse of Eternity* (1996), note that widows and parents sometimes report vivid experiences of seeing or hearing the deceased. But the crucial point, as N. T. Wright stresses (*The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 2003), is that such experiences are never taken as evidence that the deceased has risen bodily from the grave. Rather, they are interpreted as signs that the person is dead and perhaps lives on in a spiritual realm. In Jewish thought, such visions would have been interpreted not as resurrection but as *assumption* into heaven or as visions of the soul in paradise. Dunn demands:

"Why did they conclude that it was Jesus *risen from the dead*?—Why not simply a vision of the dead man?—Why not visions "fleshed out" with the apparatus of apocalyptic expectation, coming on the clouds of glory and the like . . .? Why draw the astonishing conclusion that the *eschatological* resurrection had *already* taken place in the case of a *single individual* separate from and prior to the general resurrection?"[179]

As Dunn's last question indicates, the inference "he has been raised from the dead," so natural to our ears, would have been wholly unnatural to a first-century Jew. In Jewish thinking there was already a category perfectly suited to describe Peter's postulated experience: Jesus had been assumed into heaven. Allison himself admits, "If there was no reason to believe that his solid body had returned to life, no one would have thought him, against expectation, resurrected from the dead. Certainly visions of or perceived encounters with a postmortem Jesus would not by themselves, have supplied such reason."[180]

The Hebrew Bible provides examples of such assumptions: Enoch (Genesis 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:11) were taken into heaven without dying. Similarly, *The Testament of Job* (ch. 39–40) tells of two children killed in a house collapse whose bodies vanish, and their mother sees a vision of them glorified in heaven. But in all these cases, assumption into heaven is not resurrection. Resurrection meant the raising of the dead in the space-time world, not visions of them in heavenly glory. Thus, even if the disciples had hallucinated visions of Jesus, the natural Jewish interpretation would have been that he had been taken up into heaven—not that he had risen from the dead within history. The Hallucination Hypothesis therefore fails to explain the origin of the disciples' radical and unexpected claim: *"God has raised Jesus from the dead."* It thus has unacceptably narrow explanatory scope.

2. Explanatory Power

When we turn to explanatory power, the weaknesses of the Hallucination Hypothesis become even more evident. The appearances of Jesus were not isolated or uniform experiences. They were multiple, diverse, and communal. Jesus appeared at different times, in different

[179] James W. D. G. Dunn, Jesus and the Spirit (London: SCM, 1975), 132.
[180] Allison, Resurrecting Jesus, 324-25.

places, and to different groups: to individuals like Peter, to small groups like the Twelve, to larger groups like the 500 (1 Corinthians 15:3–8), and even to skeptics and enemies like James and Paul. Positing hallucinations stretches plausibility beyond the limits of the psychological evidence. Hallucinations are by nature private, subjective experiences. They cannot be shared in the way the Gospels and Paul's letters describe. Moreover, the variety of circumstances is striking. Jesus appears indoors and outdoors, by lakeshores and in gardens, to men and women, to friends and foes, by day and by night. He speaks, eats, teaches, and commissions. To explain this range by hallucinations requires cobbling together different kinds of unrelated experiences from the psychological casebooks. But this "patchwork" approach only underlines the fact that there is nothing comparable in the psychological literature to the resurrection appearances.

For multiple individuals and groups of people, at different times, places, and circumstances, to have such oddly consistent, multimodal hallucinations (especially for something as peculiarly novel to the Jewish worldview as an *eschatological* resurrection *already* happening for *one man*), including hallucinations that somehow stretch across individuals (e.g., back-and-forth conversation, such as that on the road to Emmaus, or eating together, as is independently attested), and including skeptics and enemies (i.e., James and Paul) with no hallucinatory predisposition, is *extremely* improbable. Such an event would require a chance level of unprecedented neural synchronization bordering on scientifically impossible.

Finally, the Hallucination Hypothesis is particularly weak in explaining the conversions of James and Paul. Both were skeptics—James an unbelieving relative of Jesus (John 7:5), and Paul a persecutor of the church (Galatians 1:13). Neither was in a state of bereavement or guilt-induced longing for Jesus' return. Yet both became convinced that Jesus had appeared to them and were transformed into leaders of the early church. Hallucinations induced by grief might explain a disciple's vision, but they cannot plausibly account for sudden reversals in hostile skeptics.

3. Plausibility

Lüdemann sought to increase plausibility by offering a **psychoanalytic account** of Peter and Paul. He argued that Peter, wracked with guilt over denying Jesus, projected a hallucination of him. Paul, likewise,

supposedly suffered from deep inner conflict under the Jewish Law and projected a vision of Jesus on the Damascus Road. But this approach suffers from serious flaws.

First, Lüdemann's method relies on speculative theories of depth psychology derived from Freud and Jung, schools of thought that are highly disputed and largely discredited as explanatory frameworks in modern psychology.

Second, psychoanalysis of historical figures is notoriously unreliable. As Ernst Käsemann and other historians have noted, psychobiographies of ancient figures are highly speculative, since we lack the detailed clinical data necessary for genuine psychological analysis. Even with living patients, psychoanalysis is uncertain; with ancient figures, it is virtually impossible.

Third, the data we do have do not support Lüdemann's account. Paul, far from struggling with guilt, described his pre-Christian life as blameless: *"As to righteousness under the law, I was blameless"* (Philippians 3:6). Krister Stendahl's influential essay *"The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West"* (1963) showed that Western interpreters, influenced by Martin Luther's guilt-driven theology, have mistakenly read Paul as tormented by guilt. In fact, Paul appears to have been a zealous, satisfied Pharisee until his dramatic conversion. Stendahl writes:

"Contrast Paul, a very happy and successful Jew, one who can say "As to righteousness under the Law [I was] blameless" (Phil. 3.6). That is what he says. He experiences no troubles, no problems, no qualms of conscience. He is a star pupil, the student to get the thousand-dollar graduate scholarship in Gamaliel's Seminary… Nowhere in Paul's writings is there any indication…that psychologically Paul had some problem of conscience."[181]

In order to justify his portrait of a guilt-ridden Paul, Lüdemann is forced to interpret Romans 7 in terms of Paul's pre-Christian experience. But, as Hans Kessler observes, this interpretation is

[181] Krister Stendahl, "Paul among Jews and Gentiles," in Paul among Jews and Gentiles (Philadelphia: Fortesss, 1976), 12-13.

rejected by almost all commentators since the late 1920's.[182] Thus, Lüdemann's psychoanalysis of Paul is historically implausible.

Another implausibility lies in reducing all appearances to "visions" of the same kind as Paul's Damascus Road experience. Lüdemann recognizes that the Hallucination Hypothesis depends on the presupposition that what Paul saw on the Damascus Road was the same as what all the other disciples experienced: "Anyone who does not share [this] presupposition will not be able to make any sense" out of what he has to say. But this presupposition is groundless. Many of Paul's opponents denied his true apostleship, so Paul is anxious to include himself along with the other apostles who had seen Christ. John Dominic Crossan explains: "Paul *needs* in I Cor 15 to equate his own experience with that of the preceding apostles. To equate, that is, its *validity and legitimacy*, but not necessarily its mode or manner ... Paul's own entranced revelation should not be presumed to be the model for all others."[183] Paul insists in 1 Corinthians 15:8 that his appearance was the "last of all" and unusual. He includes it in the list of appearances not because it was identical but to show that he, too, had seen the risen Lord and so was an apostle. To reduce all the disciples' appearances to Paul's visionary experience is anachronistic and disregards Paul's own intention.

4. Less Contrived

The Hallucination Hypothesis is also contrived in multiple ways. It assumes, without evidence, that the disciples all fled to Galilee after Jesus' arrest, and that they were so grief-stricken as to be prone to hallucinations. It assumes Peter's guilt was so consuming that he projected an appearance. It assumes that James and Paul were psychologically primed for visions when the evidence suggests the opposite. It assumes that group hallucinations of a kind unknown in psychology occurred repeatedly in diverse contexts. Each of these assumptions is speculative and unsupported, making the hypothesis highly ad hoc.

[182] Hans Kessler, Sucht den Lebenden nicht bei den Toten, new ed. (Wurzburg: Echter, 1995), 423.
[183] John Dominic Crossan, Jesus: A Revolutionary Bibliography (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994), 169.

5. Disconfirmed by Accepted Beliefs

The Hallucination Hypothesis is also disconfirmed by multiple accepted scholarly beliefs. Most scholars today affirm that Jesus was buried by Joseph of Arimathea, that his tomb was found empty by women, and that hallucinations do not produce shared group experiences. Historians generally reject psychoanalytic reconstructions of ancient figures. They also recognize that Paul did not suffer from a guilt complex and that the New Testament distinguishes between a mere vision and a resurrection appearance. For example, Acts 12:9 distinguishes Peter's vision of an angel from real events; in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul distinguishes resurrection appearances from other visionary experiences. Thus, the Hallucination Hypothesis runs counter to *multiple* well-established historical judgments.

6. Comparative Superiority

Finally, the Hallucination Hypothesis fails to exceed the Resurrection Hypothesis in fulfilling explanatory criteria. It cannot account for the empty tomb, fails to explain the disciples' resurrection belief within their Jewish framework, cannot plausibly explain the diversity and communal nature of the appearances, relies on speculative psychoanalysis, and is contrived in its assumptions.

That said, unlike conspiracy or swoon theories, the Hallucination Hypothesis is still taken seriously in some academic circles. It remains "a live option," especially among skeptical scholars like Lüdemann and Dale Allison (who offers a more nuanced account in *Resurrecting Jesus*, 2005). But the question is not whether it is a live option, but whether it provides the **best explanation**. On the IBE criteria, it fails.

The Legend Hypothesis

The **Legend Hypothesis** contends that belief in Jesus' resurrection was not the result of deliberate deceit (as in the Conspiracy Hypothesis), or of psychological phenomena (as in the Hallucination Hypothesis), or of some naturalistic occurrence mistaken for resurrection (as in the Swoon or Wrong Tomb Hypotheses). Rather, it claims that the resurrection stories are legendary developments that gradually grew in the early Christian community. In this view, Jesus may have lived and died by

crucifixion, but the accounts of an empty tomb and post-mortem appearances are mythological accretions, embellishments layered upon the historical memory of Jesus. This idea has roots in the radical skepticism of 19th-century scholars such as Bruno Bauer, but today it is sometimes associated with fringe figures like John Dominic Crossan (who saw the appearances as "parables" of faith rather than literal events) or certain mythicists who deny Jesus' historicity altogether (though this extreme view has virtually no scholarly defenders).

At first glance, the Legend Hypothesis may seem attractive to skeptics, since legendary development is a known feature of religious literature. Yet when assessed by the criteria of Inference to the Best Explanation, the theory quickly proves inadequate.

1. Explanatory Scope

The Legend Hypothesis suffers from critically narrow scope. It must dismiss or explain away **nearly all of the minimal facts** that contemporary scholarship recognizes:

- The crucifixion and honorable burial by Joseph of Arimathea.
- The discovery of the empty tomb by women.
- The multiple, early post-mortem appearance traditions.
- The transformation of the disciples and their willingness to suffer and die for their belief.
- The sudden conversions of skeptics like James and Paul.

Legends take time to develop, but the traditions surrounding the resurrection emerged **within just a few years** of Jesus' death. Paul's testimony in 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 is universally recognized as preserving an early creedal formula dating to within 2–5 years after the crucifixion (James Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 2003, pp. 855–856). Similarly, Rudolf Pesch, a German specialist in Mark, dated the Passion source Mark used to the mid-30s AD—just a handful of years after the events themselves. This means that the bedrock traditions (burial, empty tomb, appearances) were circulating while eyewitnesses were still alive. Legends simply do not emerge with such speed, especially in the presence of hostile witnesses (both Jewish and Roman) who could have contradicted them.

Comparatively, the biographies of Alexander the Great were not written until centuries after his death (by Arrian and Plutarch), and it is

only after *those* centuries that truly legendary material appears. As A. N. Sherwin-White noted, for the Gospels to have become pure legend in such a short span "the rate of legendary accumulation would have to be unbelievable" (*Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, 1963, p. 190). In his own words:

"For Acts the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming. Any attempt to reject its basic historicity, even in matters of detail, must now appear absurd. Roman historians have long taken it for granted. In what other field of ancient history would a legend hypothesis be even entertained, given the proximity of the evidence to the events?"[184]

2. Explanatory Power

The explanatory power of the Legend Hypothesis is weak. Even if some legendary development occurred over decades (as in later apocryphal gospels), this cannot explain the earliest resurrection traditions embedded in Paul's letters. Paul's testimony—pre-dating the Gospels—attests to specific individuals (Peter, James), groups (the Twelve), and even a crowd of "over 500" who claimed to have seen Jesus alive (and for whom Paul rhetorically invites scrutiny). The resurrection proclamation was not a late myth but the central, public claim of the church from its *inception.* Martin Hengel, a German historian of early Christianity from the University of Tübingen, boldly declares:

"The time span between the death of Jesus and the writing of the Gospels is too short for a process of mythologization of any substantial kind to have taken place. The idea that such a massive legendary development could occur in less than a generation is historically impossible."[185]

Moreover, the Legend Hypothesis cannot explain the disciples' sincere conviction that Jesus was risen. Legends may inspire faith, but they do not generate the kind of radical transformation that drove the earliest disciples to risk martyrdom. Nor does the hypothesis explain why the

[184] Sherwin-White, A.N. Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament (1963), p. 189
[185] Hengel, Martin. The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ (2000), p. 6

disciples, from within a Jewish apocalyptic worldview, would come to the unprecedented belief that the Messiah—killed by pagans—had been bodily raised within history. Legends typically conform to cultural expectations; the resurrection belief was a sharp departure from them.

Finally, the Legend Hypothesis fares poorly against the empty tomb. If the empty tomb were a late invention, it is strange that the Gospels place women (whose testimony carried little weight in first-century Judaism) as the discoverers. Legendary development would likely have produced male disciples as witnesses. The criterion of embarrassment therefore strongly supports historicity. The very nature of the Gospels and Pauline Epistles, at least for the minimal historical facts, resists legendary reduction. As C. S. Lewis—a distinguished Cambridge professor and literary scholar with extensive familiarity with mythological traditions concerning dying-and-rising gods—has eloquently said:

"First then, whatever these men may be as Biblical critics, I distrust them as critics. They seem to me to lack literary judgement, to be imperceptive about the very quality of the texts they are reading. It sounds a strange charge to bring against men who have been steeped in those books all their lives. But that might be just the trouble. A man who has spent his youth and manhood in the minute study of New Testament texts and of other people's studies of them, whose literary experience of those texts lacks any standard of comparison such as can only grow from a wide and deep and genial experience of literature in general, is, I should think, very likely to miss the obvious thing about them. If he tells me that something in a Gospel is legend or romance, I want to know how many legends and romances he has read, how well his palate is trained in detecting them by the flavour; not how many years he has spent on that Gospel … I have been reading poems, romances, vision-literature, legends, myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know that not one of them is like this. Of this text there are only two possible views. Either this is reportage – though it may no doubt contain errors – pretty close up to the facts; nearly as close as Boswell. Or else, some unknown writer in the second century, without known predecessors, or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern,

novelistic, realistic narrative. If it is untrue, it must be narrative of that kind. The reader who doesn't see this has simply not learned to read."[186]

3. Plausibility

For the Legend Hypothesis to be plausible, one would have to posit that a high density of legendary development occurred in a uniquely compressed period of time. But this is contrary to what we know about how legends form. In Greco-Roman history, generations typically pass before legend overtakes history, allowing eyewitnesses to die off. Yet in the case of Jesus, the core resurrection proclamation was in circulation almost immediately. As Larry Hurtado has shown, the worship of Jesus as divine exploded onto the scene within a few short years after his death (*Lord Jesus Christ*, 2003). This is not the gradual trajectory of legend but the sudden eruption of conviction.

Additionally, the hypothesis is implausible given the external checks. The resurrection was proclaimed in Jerusalem, the very city where Jesus was crucified and buried. If the accounts were legendary fabrications, Jewish leaders could have produced the corpse or pointed to the known burial site. Instead, the polemic was over why the tomb was empty, not over whether it was.

4. Less Contrived

The Legend Hypothesis becomes contrived because it must selectively accept or reject evidence based on prior commitment to naturalism. It accepts the crucifixion (since it is multiply attested and historically secure) but denies the empty tomb, even though that, too, enjoys multiple early attestations. It accepts that disciples came to believe something radical happened but denies the explanatory power of appearances, despite their early and diverse testimony. It also tends to downplay or dismiss embarrassing details (women as witnesses, the slow belief of the disciples, the initial doubt of some). The ad hoc nature of this selectivity renders the hypothesis contrived.

[186] Lewis, C.S. Fern-Seed and Elephants (1959), p. 14

5. Disconfirmed by Accepted Beliefs

The Legend Hypothesis is disconfirmed by widely accepted scholarly conclusions:

- **Early Creeds**: The 1 Corinthians 15 creed is early, not late.
- **Burial by Joseph**: This tradition is multiply attested and highly probable.
- **Empty Tomb**: The early polemics and female witnesses make it historically credible.
- **Appearance Traditions**: These are too early, widespread, and communal to be reduced to late legends.

The consensus in contemporary New Testament criticism is that the resurrection belief was present from the very beginning of the movement, not something that grew up generations later.

6. Comparative Superiority

Finally, the Legend Hypothesis does not surpass other hypotheses in explanatory adequacy. It has narrow scope, weak power, low plausibility, contrived selectivity, and conflicts with well-established facts. Moreover, *even if* one were to grant—contrary to the evidence—that the Gospels, the Pauline letters, and any underlying traditions were highly unreliable or heavily shaped by legend, this would still not pose a decisive obstacle. Historians routinely extract factual data from sources that are complex, biased, or interwoven with legendary material. By employing standard criteria of authenticity—such as multiple independent attestation, embarrassment, dissimilarity, historical congruence, linguistic traces, and overall coherence—scholars can reliably distill genuine historical information from imperfect texts. It is through these very methods that researchers across the scholarly spectrum arrive at the widely accepted minimal facts. The notion that the Gospels are "too legendary" to yield any historical truth at all is universally rejected within modern scholarship. Consequently, a legend hypothesis does nothing to overturn the minimal facts argument.

A sophisticated critic might argue that modern psychology and sociology provide a highly parsimonious naturalistic explanation for the rise of early Christianity. On this view, belief in the resurrection could have emerged through a combination of well-known psychological and social mechanisms. First, bereavement hallucinations are well documented in clinical literature; people who lose loved ones sometimes report vivid experiences of seeing or hearing the deceased. Second, theories of cognitive dissonance, famously developed by Leon Festinger, suggest that apocalyptic movements often reinterpret failed expectations rather than abandoning them. Instead of dissolving when hopes collapse, groups may reinterpret events in ways that preserve their core commitments. Third, scholars working within social memory theory, such as Dale C. Allison Jr. and Chris Keith, argue that collective memories can gradually evolve within communities, producing narratives that diverge from the original events. According to this approach, grief-induced visions, reinforced through group dynamics and gradually reshaped through social memory, could explain how resurrection belief emerged. Because these mechanisms are known to occur in the real world, the explanation may initially appear elegantly parsimonious.

However, when examined carefully, this proposal collapses into a hybrid of the hallucination hypothesis and a form of the legend or social-memory hypothesis, and it struggles to explain several key features of the historical data in almost the exact same way. First, as we've already seen, hallucinations alone do not explain the empty tomb. Psychological experiences—no matter how vivid—do not move physical objects. A hallucination may convince someone they have seen a person, but it cannot remove a body from a grave. If the empty tomb tradition has even moderate historical credibility, then a purely psychological explanation leaves one of the central pieces of the puzzle completely unaddressed.

Second—and far more striking—the hallucination model struggles profoundly to explain the sudden conversions of skeptics such as James and especially Paul. Bereavement hallucinations typically occur among people who loved and longed for the deceased. But Paul was not a grieving follower. He was an active persecutor of the early Christian movement, deeply opposed to its claims. Explaining his dramatic conversion through grief, social contagion, or group reinforcement is therefore extraordinarily implausible. To grasp the force of the difficulty, imagine a modern parallel. It would be something like the fierce atheist Richard Dawkins suddenly becoming an evangelical

Christian—not after years of gradual reconsideration, but abruptly, after an experience which he genuinely interprets as an appearance of the risen Jesus. Moreover, imagine that Dawkins immediately began proclaiming that message publicly and endured hardship for it. Attempting to explain such a transformation merely by appealing to "social contagion" from enthusiastic believers would strike most observers as wildly inadequate. Yet the case of Paul is arguably even more dramatic, since he was not merely a critic but a persecutor who had every ideological incentive to resist the movement.

Third, the resurrection proclamation itself was highly counterintuitive within its historical context. As scholars such as N. T. Wright have emphasized, neither Jewish nor Greco-Roman thought provided a conceptual template for the claim that one individual had already been bodily raised in the middle of history. Jewish expectations generally involved a collective resurrection at the end of the age, while Greco-Roman thought typically regarded bodily resurrection as undesirable or impossible. In a first-century context, asserting that the eschatological resurrection had occurred for Jesus alone was a massive category error. It would be functionally equivalent to claiming that the cosmic apocalypse had arrived, but that it was happening to only one person, in the middle of history, while the rest of the universe remained completely unchanged. The early Christian proclamation therefore ran against the grain of both intellectual environments, making it difficult to explain as a simple cultural or psychological coping mechanism.

Fourth, the resurrection proclamation appears very early and surprisingly consistent across diverse witnesses. Traditions such as the creed preserved in 1 Corinthians 15 are widely dated by scholars to within only a few years of the events themselves. This means the core claim—that Jesus appeared alive to various individuals and groups—was already circulating extremely early, as we've seen. Such proximity to the events leaves relatively little room for the kind of slow legendary evolution envisioned by strong social memory models.

One might press the objection further and argue that, following Paula Fredriksen, Jesus and his followers were hardcore apocalyptic Jews who believed the end of the world was *already* happening. After all, since they were "committed to Jesus's prophecy—"The Kingdom of God is at hand!"—they were, in their own eyes, history's last

generation."[187] When Jesus died and the grief-stricken disciples experienced visions of him, their apocalyptic framework led them to a perfectly natural psychological conclusion: the general resurrection had just commenced, starting with Jesus as the "firstfruits." Thus, the resurrection claim isn't an unexplainable Jewish anomaly requiring an empty tomb; it's the predictable psychological outcome of *apocalyptic* zealots experiencing bereavement hallucinations.

This proposal has real dialectical force, because it does not require the disciples to be conscious deceivers, it takes seriously the intense *eschatological* atmosphere of the period, and it draws on what appears to be pretty well-attested psychological facts. But it is not decisive.

First, the objection relies heavily on Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance: when a high-investment apocalyptic group experiences the catastrophic failure of their leader, they do not disband; they rationalize and double down. However, historians actually have "control groups" to *test* this theory in the first century. Jesus was not the only messianic claimant of the era; there were many, from Judas the Galilean to Simon bar Kokhba. When these movements collided with the Roman empire and their leaders were executed, the followers experienced the exact same cognitive dissonance and grief as the disciples of Jesus.[188]

Yet, as N.T. Wright emphasizes, "in no case right across the century before Jesus and the century after him do we hear of any Jewish group saying that their executed leader had been raised from the dead, and he really was the Messiah after all". When your messiah was killed, you had two culturally sanctioned choices: go home, or find a new messiah (usually a brother or cousin of the deceased). If cognitive dissonance and grief naturally produce resurrection claims in first-century apocalyptic Jews, why did it *only* happen with Jesus, despite identical sociological pressures in other movements?

Second, the argument assumes that if the disciples had a vivid hallucination of Jesus, they would automatically call it a "resurrection." But, as we've seen, linguistic history proves otherwise. The ancient

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[187] Frederiksen, Paula. *When Christians were Jews: The First Generation*. https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300248401/when-christians-were-jews/

[188] To be fair, while some, like the followers of bar Kokhba (e.g., Rabbi Akiva), doubled down on their reverence, they *never* claimed their leader had risen from the grave. The fact that even desperate, loyal followers of collapsed messianic movements did not reach for the concept of resurrection is telling.

Mediterranean world possessed a highly developed vocabulary for encountering the dead: ghosts, angelic transformations, revenants, resuscitations, exaltations, and assumptions to heaven (like Enoch or Elijah). If Peter, steeped in apocalyptic Judaism, had a grief-induced hallucination of a radiant Jesus, the culturally conditioned psychological response would be: *"Jesus has been exalted to God's right hand as a vindicated martyr."* To use the phrase *anastasis ek nekron* (resurrection)—which strictly meant the physical reanimation and transformation of a corpse within space and time—would be a profound category error for a mere vision. As Wright points out, plenty of words existed to denote a non-bodily extension of life in a heavenly realm, but "resurrection" was never one of them. A vision of Jesus would convince a Jew that Jesus was alive in heaven, not that he had been bodily resurrected on Earth.

Third, the objection posits that the disciples used the apocalyptic "firstfruits" concept to categorize their hallucinations. This gets the history exactly backward. The objection assumes the disciples had a pre-existing theological template of an individual "firstfruits" resurrection that they could conveniently apply to their visions. They did not. In Jewish thought, the resurrection was exclusively a single, *collective* event at the end of history. The idea of an *individual* resurrection splitting history in two was a massive theological mutation. It is far more historically plausible that an undeniable, physical *event* forced the violent mutation of their eschatology, rather than their eschatology spontaneously generating the hallucination. The "firstfruits" theology was the *result* of the resurrection, not the *cause* of the claim.

Fourth, for a first-century Jew to declare that the eschatological resurrection had begun in the middle of history, two stringent conditions had to be met:

- **An Appearance:** To show that the person was visibly, tangibly alive.
- **An Empty Tomb:** To prove that it was a *bodily* event, not a ghost, a vision, or a heavenly translation.

The apocalyptic hypothesis attempts to bypass the empty tomb by placing all the explanatory weight on the visions. But without the empty tomb, the apocalyptic theology fails to launch. Visions alone would produce claims of spiritual exaltation. An empty tomb alone

would produce claims of grave displacement or bodily assumption into Heaven. *Only* the combination of both generates the specific historical mutation we see in early Christianity.

Neither can one legitimately claim that Jesus' predictions of his resurrection somehow predisposed or caused the disciples to experience hallucinations. The physical post-mortem appearances of Jesus are widely regarded as better attested than the resurrection predictions themselves, many of which critical scholars consider to have been shaped or articulated after the fact within the Gospel tradition. So, if one accepts the predictions, one must also accept the physical appearances, in which case the hallucination hypothesis becomes untenable. If one accepts the predictions as historical, one must also take seriously the disciples' confusion, dismissal, and lack of understanding, which the texts explicitly place alongside those predictions (e.g., Luke 18:31–34; 24:9–11).

Finally, we must ask whether the mathematics—and the psychology—actually justify the confident assertion that the resurrection appearances were merely hallucinations or instances of cognitive dissonance. Consider the appearance to the disciples, the core apostolic group (one of the best-attested). Suppose, for the sake of argument, that each of the eleven remaining disciples had an astonishingly high 90% chance of hallucinating a bodily resurrected Jesus. Even this concession radically overstates the skeptical case. Bereavement experiences, while real and well-attested, do not normally generate tightly coordinated, multi-person encounters with the same embodied individual. More importantly, they do not naturally produce the specific belief that a man had been physically raised from the dead into immortal glory in the middle of history.

That final point is crucial. First-century Jews already possessed categories for honoring deceased holy men. They could speak of heavenly assumption, exaltation, vindication, spiritual visions, angelic appearances, or the continued influence of a prophet after death. But "this man has been bodily resurrected ahead of the general resurrection" was not the default psychological conclusion available to grieving disciples. As noted earlier regarding the catastrophic defeat of Simon bar Kokhba, even an intensely devoted messianic movement led by revered sages did not spontaneously generate a resurrection narrative to rescue a failed Messiah**.** The Christian claim therefore cannot be dismissed as some predictable psychological reflex.

And even under these wildly generous assumptions, the mathematics remain problematic for the hallucination theory. If hallucinations are fundamentally private neurological events—not externally projected realities transmitted identically from one brain to another—then the probability of all eleven disciples converging on the same specific error is 0.9^{11}, or roughly 31%. And that figure is already inflated by assumptions so charitable to skepticism that few psychologists would defend them.

At this point, the skeptic will often invoke "social contagion." But notice a crucial point: the 0.9^{11} calculation *already assumes* social contagion.

Let $P(H)$ represent the probability that a person (like Peter) experiences a grief-induced hallucination, and let $P(S)$ represent the probability that the hallucination takes the same highly specific, multisensory form (rather than, for example, a vague light, an indistinct feeling, a disembodied voice, or some entirely different visual experience).

If the eleven disciples experienced their visions independently, without mutual priming or interpersonal reinforcement, then the product rule for independent events applies. The probability of one individual having this specific experience would be:

$$P(H) \times P(S)$$

Accordingly, the probability that all eleven independently experienced the same specific appearance would be:

$$P(E_{11}) = (P(H) \times P(S))^{11}$$

Because $P(S)$ is extraordinarily small—human brains do not spontaneously generate identical, detailed dream-states across multiple individuals—raising it to the eleventh power drives the probability toward practical zero.

My calculation (i.e., 0.9^{11} or 31%), however, does *not* assume independence. On the contrary, it grants the skeptical hypothesis a massive concession by assuming strong social contagion effects between individuals and groups. The model assumes that Peter's

testimony strongly influences John, John influences Andrew, and so forth, producing a sequential cascade in which each individual has, hypothetically, a 90% probability of entering the same hallucination/cognitive-dissonance state precisely because others have already reported it and they come to accept the prior testimony as genuine.

And the theory strains further once James and Paul enter the picture. James was not presented as a member of the inner apostolic circle during Jesus' ministry, and Paul was not a grieving disciple longing for vindication. Paul was an opponent actively persecuting the movement. Yet the hallucination hypothesis must now maintain that isolated individuals outside the emotional environment of the disciples independently underwent perfectly timed, transformative experiences of the very figure whose followers they opposed. Even granting Paul an absurdly generous 80% chance of such an event, the cumulative probability rapidly deteriorates. Multiplying 0.31 by 0.80 yields a compounded probability of 0.248—meaning the likelihood drops below 25%. If we also charitably assume that James and Jesus' other siblings had a 90% chance of "catching" the delusion, then the probability becomes 0.248×0.9, which is 0.2232, or about 22%.

Nor is that the end of the explanatory burden. One must still account for the empty tomb traditions, the appearance to the five hundred[189], the explosive survival of a movement centered on a crucified Messiah, and the remarkable earliness of the resurrection proclamation itself. The tradition preserved in 1 Corinthians 15 is widely regarded by scholars as extremely early (i.e., within 2-5 years, perhaps even months, of the events)—far too early for centuries of legendary evolution to explain away the core claim. The skeptic is therefore not merely proposing that a few grieving followers had visionary experiences. He is proposing

[189] If we take the appearance to the five hundred with even partial seriousness, then the hallucination or cognitive dissonance hypothesis immediately collapses. Suppose that Paul was grossly exaggerating and that only 150, not 500, people actually saw Jesus alive after his death. Suppose extremely strong social contagion exists among the members of that group. The probability, with extremely strong social contagion (not independence) taken into account, is 0.98^{150}, which is about 0.048, or less than 5%. In other words, even under this model—assuming Paul was largely exaggerating (despite the 1 Corinthians creed's extreme earliness and his costly rhetorical invitation for scrutiny) and extreme social contagion of a kind unprecedented in psychology somehow "propagated" effortlessly—the probability that the event, if it occurred, was hallucinatory is less than 5%, and the probability that the evidence was veridical (i.e., having some objective external referent) is 95%.

that multiple individuals and groups, across varying psychological conditions, independently or semi-independently generated experiences and interpretations so unusually synchronized that they collectively produced one of the most explosive religious movements in world history—all within an extraordinarily compressed historical timeframe. Dr. Gary A. Sibcy, a clinical psychologist who specializes in abnormal psychology and mental health, comments:

"I have surveyed the professional literature (peer-reviewed journal articles and books) written by psychologists, psychiatrists, and other relevant healthcare professionals during the past two decades and have yet to find a single documented case of a group hallucination, that is, an event for which more than one person purportedly shared in a visual or other sensory hallucination where there was clearly no external referent."[190]

If a shared sensory hallucination is generally thought of as clinically rare in modern medical literature, how much more so is the contrived, multi-layered amalgamation the skeptic proposes? Taken together, these considerations significantly weaken the hallucination-plus-social-memory explanation. While bereavement hallucinations, cognitive dissonance, and memory development are real psychological phenomena, invoking them here creates substantial explanatory gaps. The same problems remain stubbornly unresolved: explaining the empty tomb, accounting for the conversions of skeptics like James and Paul, making sense of the striking novelty of the resurrection claim, and explaining the early and multi-source character of the proclamation. Even more sophisticated versions of the social memory hypothesis—though more nuanced—do not ultimately solve these problems. At best, they explain how beliefs might spread or evolve within a community; they do not adequately explain why the belief that Jesus had appeared alive arose so early, so confidently, and among such a diverse set of individuals in the first place. At some point, the hallucination/social-memory hypothesis ceases to look like the simpler explanation. It begins to resemble an increasingly elaborate attempt to explain away the very data it was supposed to illuminate.

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[190] Gary A. Sibcy, as cited in Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2004), 106.

The Twin-Brother / Impersonator Hypothesis

The **Twin-Brother or Impersonator Hypothesis** proposes that Jesus had an unknown identical twin (or at least someone who closely resembled him), who either intentionally or accidentally impersonated him after the crucifixion, thereby giving rise to the belief that he had risen from the dead. Variants of this hypothesis can be found as far back as some heterodox Gnostic traditions, such as the Acts of Thomas, which depicts the apostle Thomas ("Didymus," meaning "twin") as Jesus' twin brother. In modern times, it occasionally resurfaces in skeptical or sensationalist writing, though almost no contemporary scholars give it serious consideration.

Despite its outlandishness, the hypothesis is worth addressing because it purports to explain the **appearances** of Jesus after his death without appealing to either hallucination or miracle. Yet when measured against the criteria of Inference to the Best Explanation, it is quickly shown to be deeply inadequate.

1. Explanatory Scope

On the surface, the Twin-Brother Hypothesis attempts to explain at least one element of the data: the post-mortem appearances. If Jesus had a twin or lookalike, that person could conceivably have presented himself to the disciples, leading them to believe Jesus had risen. However, the scope of this explanation is extremely limited.

First, it says nothing about the empty tomb. The twin would not have been buried, nor could his existence explain why Jesus' actual tomb was found empty. One must conjoin another independent hypothesis (conspiracy, displaced body, wrong tomb) to explain the empty tomb, multiplying assumptions.

Second, it fails to explain the origin of the disciples' resurrection belief in the Jewish context. A twin appearing after the crucifixion would not naturally lead to the conclusion that Jesus had risen bodily from the dead. At most, it would raise suspicions of mistaken identity or deception. Resurrection in the Jewish worldview was not about doppelgängers—it was about the transformation of the dead. Thus, the scope of this hypothesis is confined narrowly to appearances and fails to cover the broader range of minimal facts.

2. Explanatory Power

The explanatory power of the hypothesis is also very weak. The appearances were not fleeting glimpses of a familiar figure at a distance, as though easily mistaken. They involved extended interactions: Jesus teaching, eating, inviting Thomas to touch his wounds (John 20:27), cooking fish by the Sea of Galilee (John 21:12–13), and appearing to large groups in varied circumstances (1 Corinthians 15:6). These are not scenarios in which a mere lookalike could plausibly deceive.

Furthermore, many of the appearances occurred to disciples who had lived with Jesus for years. They knew his voice, his mannerisms, his habits, his teaching style. It stretches credulity to suppose that such intimate acquaintances could be fooled repeatedly by an impostor. One need not even mention James, Jesus' *own brother!* For Jesus' own brother, despite being a skeptic, to be so thoroughly and easily deceived (even to the point of martyrdom) by an impersonator is extremely improbable.

3. Plausibility

The plausibility of the hypothesis is virtually nil. There is no historical evidence that Jesus had a twin brother. While "Didymus" (meaning "twin") is indeed a name associated with the apostle Thomas, there is no reason to connect this with Jesus himself. The canonical Gospels, the Pauline letters, and non-Christian sources all make no mention of a twin. On the contrary, Jesus' family is consistently presented in the tradition: his mother Mary, his brothers James, Joses, Judas, and Simon (Mark 6:3). Had there been a twin, it would have been widely known and could not have been kept secret.

The hypothesis also presupposes an extraordinary deception. The supposed twin would have had to appear at exactly the right time and place after Jesus' crucifixion, persuade multiple groups of people over a span of forty days, and then vanish from history without leaving a trace. Such a conspiracy requires a host of ad hoc assumptions with no independent evidence.

4. Less Contrived

The contrived nature of the Twin-Brother Hypothesis is evident in its speculative fabrications. It invents a twin or impersonator for whom there is not a shred of historical evidence. It then posits that this individual decided to deceive or unintentionally convinced others of resurrection, yet left no trace in any tradition. To salvage the hypothesis, one must multiply conjectures—why did the twin remain hidden throughout Jesus' ministry? What motivated him to impersonate his crucified brother? How did he replicate the marks of crucifixion (hands, feet, and side) so convincingly that Thomas was persuaded? Each step requires a fresh ad hoc supposition. As a result, the theory is vastly more contrived than its alternatives.

5. Disconfirmed by Accepted Beliefs

The hypothesis is disconfirmed by several accepted scholarly judgments:

- **Jesus' family**: His siblings are well attested. None is described as a twin, nor is any twin mentioned in early polemics.
- **The empty tomb**: The tradition is early and robust; an impersonator cannot explain it.
- **The diversity of appearances**: These include close physical and personal interactions that a mere lookalike could not provide.
- **The transformation of skeptics**: James and Paul would not be deceived by impersonation.

Thus, the hypothesis runs contrary to well-established historical facts.

6. Comparative Superiority

Finally, the Twin-Brother Hypothesis does not surpass its rivals across the explanatory criteria. It has extremely limited scope, poor explanatory power, virtually no plausibility, is highly contrived, and contradicts accepted facts. Compared even to the weak hallucination hypothesis, the twin theory fares worse, since it relies on inventing a figure for which there is no evidence.

The "Alien from Outer Space" Hypothesis

The **Alien Hypothesis** proposes that the disciples did not witness the resurrection of Jesus, but instead encountered the activity of advanced extraterrestrial beings. In this view, aliens may have reanimated Jesus' body, produced a clone, or generated convincing illusions of his post-mortem appearances. Some variants go further and claim that Jesus himself was an alien whose "resurrection" was simply the use of technology far beyond first-century comprehension. Although ideas of this sort occasionally circulate in fringe "ancient astronaut" literature—popularized by figures like Erich von Däniken, though he never explicitly applied the theory to Jesus—no reputable historian or New Testament scholar endorses such a proposal. Belief in extraterrestrial intelligence is not in itself unreasonable, but in this case the suggestion of alien intervention utterly fails as a historical explanation.

1. Explanatory Scope

On a superficial level, the Alien Hypothesis might appear to cover much of the evidence. An advanced extraterrestrial race could (in principle) explain the empty tomb (they removed or reanimated the body), the post-mortem appearances (through technological projection or physical intervention), the disciples' belief (they were convinced by what they saw), and even the conversions of skeptics (since they too experienced these phenomena).

But this breadth is only apparent. The hypothesis does not genuinely engage with the data as historians understand it. Historical explanation requires situating events within the known context of the first-century Mediterranean world, or at least with well-evidenced background considerations. Taking events wildly out of context, such as secretly attributing Napoleon's victories to hidden groups in Japan, is not serious historiography. In principle, anything could be imaginatively "explained" by omnipotent technology. Postulating alien involvement imports an entirely foreign category into the explanatory field, without any historical or even philosophical justification. As a result, it is a scope achieved only by speculative imposition, not by explanatory adequacy.

2. Explanatory Power

Explanatory power measures how well a hypothesis makes the evidence probable. Here the Alien Hypothesis fares disastrously.

The hypothesis does not make the empty tomb probable; it merely asserts that aliens could have removed the body. But this move is indistinguishable from saying, "something unknown did it." Nor does it explain the appearances: why would extraterrestrials choose to appear to Peter, James, Paul, and 500 disciples in the guise of the crucified and risen Jesus? Why would they reproduce the marks of crucifixion wounds? Why would they aim to make an apparently *human* man claim to be divine in front of *human* disciples in the first place, rather than aligning with *any* other conceivable alien purpose?

In fact, the hypothesis lacks any explanatory *specificity*. It does not make the particular shape of the evidence probable—it simply accommodates it by contrived speculation.

3. Plausibility

The plausibility of the Alien Hypothesis is virtually zero. Plausibility depends on coherence with background knowledge. Historical reconstructions must work within the framework of what is known from first-century Judaism, Greco-Roman history, broader background knowledge, and human experience. Neither does appealing to the plausibility of alien life in general help the case, because the hypothesis here is not just about existence, but about a very strange sort of *intervention.* The Alien Hypothesis is grounded only in highly speculative assumptions about extraterrestrial civilizations and their meddling in human history, for which we have no independent evidence.

4. Less Contrived

This hypothesis is the epitome of being contrived. It requires inventing an entirely unsubstantiated scenario:

- Aliens not only exist, but were present in first-century Judea.
- They either possessed or developed motives to intervene in Jewish messianic expectations.

- They deliberately chose Jesus as their subject, orchestrating his resurrection appearances.
- They then departed, leaving no other trace in the historical record.

Each of these steps introduces massive speculative assumptions with no evidence.

5. Disconfirmed by Accepted Beliefs

The Alien Hypothesis is disconfirmed by several accepted beliefs:

- **Lack of Evidence**: There is *no* compelling evidence recognized by the vast majority of philosophers, scientists, or astronomers that aliens have visited Earth in any clear or unambiguous way. To assert that they not only visited the planet, but also carried out highly specific, targeted interventions in human history—yet left behind no independently detectable or verifiable trace—is not only extremely speculative, but arguably disconfirmatory. It actively counts against the hypothesis, especially given the scale and specificity of the alleged activity.
- **Theological shape of the proclamation**: The earliest disciples proclaimed that *God* had raised Jesus. They did not appeal to strange beings from the stars.

Thus, the Alien Hypothesis is fundamentally anachronistic, reading modern science-fiction categories into an ancient context.

6. Comparative Superiority

Finally, the Alien Hypothesis does not surpass its rivals in explanatory adequacy. It has superficial scope but weak explanatory power, is implausible, wildly contrived, and contradicted by what we know about history and Jewish thought.

The Resurrection Hypothesis

Having seen the repeated failures of the naturalistic hypotheses—their narrow explanatory scope, their weak explanatory power, their implausibility in historical context, their contrived assumptions, and their frequent contradiction of well-established facts—we arrive at the central question: *Does the Resurrection Hypothesis fare any better?* Can the hypothesis that "God raised Jesus from the dead" withstand the same rigorous criteria? When carefully examined, the Resurrection Hypothesis not only surpasses all rivals, but uniquely provides a unified, powerful, and contextually fitting account of the historical evidence.

1. Explanatory Scope

The Resurrection Hypothesis covers the full breadth of the data. Unlike the Hallucination Hypothesis, which fails to explain the empty tomb, or the Displaced Body Hypothesis, which does not address the post-mortem appearances, the Resurrection Hypothesis simultaneously accounts for **all of the central facts**:

- The **empty tomb**, discovered by women on the first day of the week.
- The **post-mortem appearances** to individuals, groups, and skeptics.
- The **origin and sudden rise of the disciples' belief** in Jesus' resurrection, despite every prior expectation to the contrary, *plus* the conversions of James and Paul.

Rival hypotheses at best explain only one strand of the evidence and usually at the cost of ignoring or minimizing others. The Resurrection Hypothesis, by contrast, has a scope wide enough to encompass the entire evidential field without fragmentation.

2. Explanatory Power

Perhaps the greatest strength of the Resurrection Hypothesis lies in its explanatory power—its ability to render the evidence not merely accommodated but *extremely probable*. On this hypothesis, it is exactly what we would expect to find:

- If God raised Jesus, the tomb would be empty, as reported.
- If God raised Jesus, his followers would indeed experience him alive, teaching and interacting with them.
- If God raised Jesus, the disciples would be transformed from despairing fugitives into bold proclaimers, willing to die for their conviction.
- If God raised Jesus, it is wholly intelligible why skeptics like James and enemies like Paul would be confronted and converted.

By contrast, on the Conspiracy Hypothesis, the evidence becomes highly improbable, for liars do not choose to endure persecution and death for what they know to be false. On the Swoon Hypothesis, it becomes nearly impossible, since a half-dead, mangled man could not inspire worship as the glorified Lord of life. On the Hallucination Hypothesis, the probability collapses, since hallucinations do not appear to multiple groups, skeptics, and enemies across diverse times and places in a way that contradicts cultural beliefs. But given the Resurrection Hypothesis, all these facts fall neatly into place.

3. Plausibility

The plausibility of the Resurrection Hypothesis must be considered in its **historical and philosophical context**. Historically, Jesus was not an ordinary individual. He made unparalleled personal claims—to forgive sins, to inaugurate God's kingdom, to be the unique Son of God, and demonstrated an authority that astonished both followers and opponents. His crucifixion as "King of the Jews" was the result of these radical messianic claims. In this context, the hypothesis that God would vindicate Jesus uniquely by raising him from the dead is deeply congruent with the narrative. Jesus' resurrection was not merely an anomalous event, occurring without context; it came as the climax to Jesus' own unparalleled life and teachings. As Wolfhart Pannenberg explains:

"The resurrection of Jesus acquires such decisive meaning, not merely because someone or anyone has been raised from the dead, but because it is Jesus of Nazareth, whose execution was instigated by the Jews because he had blasphemed against God. Jesus' claim to authority, through which he put himself in God's place, was blasphemous for Jewish ears. Because of this Jesus

was then also slandered before the Roman governor as a rebel. If Jesus really has been raised, this claim has been visibly and unambiguously confirmed by God, who was allegedly blasphemed by Jesus."[191]

Thus, the religio-historical context furnishes us with the key to understanding a supernatural explanation of the facts.

Philosophically, the plausibility grows exponentially once the existence of God is admitted. If God exists—the necessary, personal, and transcendent mind who created and sustains the universe—then the raising of Jesus is no longer an arbitrary violation of natural law, but a unique act of divine self-disclosure. As William James, one of the most influential American philosophers and the "father of American psychology," put it:

"A world with a God in it to say the last word, may indeed burn up or freeze, but we then think of him as still mindful of the old ideals and sure to bring them elsewhere to fruition; so that, where he is, tragedy is only provisional and partial, and shipwreck and dissolution not the absolutely final things."[192]

What James is arguing is that if theism is true, then one cannot straightforwardly rule out restoration or renewal, even if genuinely novel or unprecedented, as impossible. On the contrary, theism provides grounds for a rational expectation that such restorative possibilities are not only open, but in some sense positively anticipated. Even if one holds that we cannot determine what a transcendent Mind—so radically different from us—would or would not do, the existence of such a concrete Mind nonetheless renders the Resurrection Hypothesis *genuinely viable* in principle. It remains conceptually open and coherently fits within a set of true background beliefs that take theism seriously. That is exactly what plausibility requires.

It is important to understand that the prior truth of a transcendent Mind's existence need not, by itself, *predict* the Resurrection Hypothesis or even render it antecedently probable. For the

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[191] Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, trans. L.L. Wilkins and D.A. Priebe (London: SCM, 1968), p. 67.
[192] William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), 106.

Resurrection Hypothesis to be plausible, it need only be *consistent* with true background beliefs. Its explanatory power derives primarily from the hypothesis itself—specifically, from how well it accounts for the relevant facts—not from the predictive content of prior assumptions alone.

For this reason, the objection that "a transcendent Mind is so radically unlike us that we could never predict what it would do" ultimately misses the point. It conflates explanatory power with antecedent plausibility. The mere existence of a necessary, concrete, conscious being that could cause a universe—even if nothing further is known about its inner nature—is sufficient for the Resurrection Hypothesis to be a plausible and live explanatory possibility. As the agnostic Australian philosopher Peter Slezak put it, "for a God who is able to create the entire universe, the odd resurrection would be child's play!"[193] And given its greater explanatory scope, stronger explanatory power, and superior parsimony, we have compelling reason to regard it as true.

4. Less Contrived

Some critics allege that the Resurrection Hypothesis is contrived—that invoking God is simply a convenient way of halting further inquiry. But contrivedness, properly defined, refers to the need for multiple ad hoc suppositions unsupported by independent evidence. By this definition, the Resurrection Hypothesis is strikingly *uncontrived*. It requires only a single supposition: that God exists. And for those who already have independent reasons to affirm God's existence—from cosmological, teleological, moral, or ontological arguments—this is not a new supposition at all.

By contrast, rival hypotheses multiply contrived assumptions. The Conspiracy Hypothesis requires us to suppose the disciples became liars and conspirators of extraordinary resilience. The Swoon Hypothesis requires us to believe Roman executioners failed in their duty, and that a half-dead victim could move a stone and inspire worship. The Hallucination Hypothesis requires us to posit a range of unprecedented psychological phenomena, including group hallucinations and the conversion of skeptics and enemies. The Legend

[193] William Lane Craig and Peter Slezak, *Atheism vs. Christianity: Where Does the Evidence Point?*, debate at Sydney Town Hall, Sydney, NSW, August 27, 2002.

Hypothesis requires an impossibly accelerated rate of legendary development within the lifetime of eyewitnesses. Each of these imports multiple ad hoc suppositions. The Resurrection Hypothesis, by contrast, is parsimonious.

It should also be noted that in the philosophy of science, the introduction of new entities (quarks, neutrinos, black holes) is not considered contrived when it provides superior explanatory power. Similarly, positing God's act of resurrection is not contrived when it naturally fits the historical and theological context of Jesus' life and mission. Indeed, it is the *naturalistic rivals* that appear artificial, not the Resurrection Hypothesis.

5. Disconfirmed by Fewer Accepted Beliefs

Does the Resurrection Hypothesis conflict with any widely accepted background beliefs? Only if one insists on a closed naturalistic worldview in which miracles are excluded *a priori*. The generalization "dead men do not rise" is true as a statement about the natural order, but it does not disconfirm the claim "God raised Jesus from the dead." The two are logically consistent: by natural processes, the dead remain dead; but if God exists, the miraculous raising of Jesus is entirely possible.

By contrast, the rival hypotheses are disconfirmed by numerous accepted beliefs: conspiracies unravel, crucifixion victims do not survive, hallucinations are private and individual, legends require time to grow. Each naturalistic theory conflicts with established psychological, historical, or sociological knowledge. The Resurrection Hypothesis alone avoids such disconfirmation.

6. Comparative Superiority

Finally, the Resurrection Hypothesis decisively exceeds its rivals in meeting all the criteria of explanatory adequacy. It has the **widest explanatory scope**, covering the empty tomb, appearances, and disciples' faith. It has the **strongest explanatory power**, rendering the evidence probable rather than improbable. It has **plausibility** in both its historical (Jesus' life and claims) and philosophical (God's existence) contexts. It is **less contrived**, requiring fewer ad hoc assumptions than any rival. And it is **disconfirmed by none** of the relevant background beliefs, unlike all naturalistic alternatives.

For these reasons, contemporary scholarship finds itself perplexed by the stubborn resilience of the resurrection claim. The stupefaction of contemporary scholarship, when confronted with the Minimal Facts, is that no better rival is anywhere on the horizon. C. F. D. Moule asks:

"If the coming into existence of the Nazarenes, a phenomenon undeniably attested by the New Testament, rips a great hole in history, a hole the size and shape of the Resurrection, what does the secular historian purpose to stop it up with? . . . The birth and rapid rise of the Christian Church . . . *remain an unsolved enigma for any historian who refuses to take seriously the only explanation offered by the Church itself.*"[194]

Grand Synthesis: Weighing Every Major Rival Against the Resurrection by IBE

Having scrutinized each competing explanation in depth, we can now stand back and compare them **side by side** using the same six, standard **Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE)** criteria we've established: **(1) explanatory scope, (2) explanatory power, (3) plausibility, (4) less contrived (parsimony), (5) conflict with accepted beliefs, (6) comparative superiority**. The data set remains constant:

- the **empty tomb**,
- the **post-mortem appearances** (multiple individuals and groups, varied places/times, including skeptics/enemies), and
- the **sudden, sincere, public conviction** of the earliest Christians that **God raised Jesus bodily**, launched at risk within **Jerusalem** itself—plus the striking **conversions of James and Paul**.

On the next page is a compact "at-a-glance" matrix, followed by brief, criterion-by-criterion syntheses for each hypothesis and a concluding assessment of why, on IBE, **the Resurrection Hypothesis** emerges as the superior historical explanation.

[194] C. F. D. Moule, *The Phenomenon of the New Testament*, Studies in Biblical Theology 2/1 (London: SCM, 1967), 3, 13.

Comparative Matrix (at a glance)

Hypothesis	Explanatory Scope	Explanatory Power	Plausibility (context: 1st-cent. Judaism + basic background knowledge)	Less-Contrived (fewest ad hoc moves)	Disconfirmed by Accepted Beliefs?	IBE Verdict
Conspiracy	Superficially broad (tomb, appearances, faith), but collapses on sincerity & diversity	Very weak (can't explain transformed courage, group/hostile-witness claims)	Low (1st-cent. Jews inventing a hoax of *resurrection* is anachronistic)	Highly ad hoc (motives, silence under persecution, zero defections)	Yes (instability of conspiracies; sincerity of witnesses)	Fails on power, plausibility, parsimony
Swoon / Apparent Death	Tries to cover tomb & appearances	Very weak (half-dead man inspires worship?)	Extremely low (Roman execution, spear thrust, medical fatality)	Ad hoc (survival, escape, travel, repeated appearances)	Yes (crucifixion lethality; Josephus case; medical data)	Collapses medically & psychologically
Displaced Body	Narrow (tomb only)	Weak even for tomb (Joseph could correct it; burial records)	Low (Jewish burial law/customs argue against later displacement)	Ad hoc (invented motives for Joseph; "silent" corrective)	Yes (customs about criminals, ossuary practice, early polemics)	Inadequate scope; contrived patches
Wrong Tomb	Narrow (tomb only)	Very weak (easy verification in Jerusalem; women saw burial site)	Low (known tomb of a Sanhedrist; early, unembellished tradition)	Ad hoc (selective acceptance of pericope details)	Yes (burial by Joseph; early empty-tomb tradition)	Dead on arrival historically
Hallucination (incl. "spiritual" variants / cognitive dissonance)	Narrow (appearances only)	Weak (group/varied/hostile appearances; Jewish category would be *assumption*, not *resurrection*)	Low-moderate (bereavement visions exist, but don't yield bodily resurrection claims)	Ad hoc (group hallucinations, tailored psychologies, skeptics converted)	Yes (nature of hallucinations; Paul's pre-Christian contentment; early bodily proclamation)	Most "serious" rival, but still fails on scope & cultural fit
Legend / Social-Memory Drift	Attempts broad coverage	Weak vs. *earliness* (1 Cor 15 creed; pre-Markan Passion; eyewitness generation alive)	Low (legendary rate would have to be "unbelievable")	Ad hoc (selective skepticism; ignores embarrassment criteria)	Yes (speed of proclamation in Jerusalem; hostile checks)	Time window too short; evidence too early
Twin / Impersonator	Narrow (some appearances)	Very weak (years of familiarity; wounds; tactile meals; James/Paul)	Minuscule (no evidence of a twin; vanishing impersonator)	Highly ad hoc (fabricated person, motives, staged wounds)	Yes (family lists; empty tomb unexplained)	Not a serious historical option
Alien / Tech Intervention	Superficially broad	Vacuous (could "explain" anything; no reason for Jewish-resurrection shape)	Near zero (no independent evidence; anachronistic category)	Maximal ad hoc (layered speculations without controls)	Yes (violates historical method constraints)	Not a historical explanation
Resurrection	**Comprehensive** (tomb, appearances, faith, conversions)	**Strong** (makes these very facts expected)	**Fitting** (given Jesus' life/claims + theism; culturally intelligible vindication)	**Parsimonious** (one unified cause; fewer patches than rivals)	**No** (unless one begs the question by excluding God a priori)	**IBE superior** across all six criteria

Synthesis by Hypothesis (why each fails under IBE)

Conspiracy. Even granting it "touches" all three data points, it hemorrhages **power** (why would liars embrace suffering/death?) and **plausibility** (first-century Jews had no conceptual incentive to fabricate *bodily resurrection*). It becomes **contrived** (invented motives, perfect silence under persecution, no defectors) and is **disconfirmed** by what we know of conspiracies and the disciples' sincerity.

Swoon / Apparent Death. It dies on **plausibility** (Roman crucifixion lethality; spear thrust), lacks **power** (a shattered survivor cannot generate worship as the glorified Lord), and quickly grows **ad hoc** (survival, escape, travel, repeated appearances). It is **disconfirmed** by medical and ancient evidence (e.g., Josephus' report of crucifixion survivals even with care rarely succeeding).

Displaced Body. At best it addresses one datum (the tomb), but its **scope** is too narrow; **power** is weak because Joseph (and his servants) could have corrected the misunderstanding; **plausibility** runs against Jewish burial law/custom; **contrived** motives must be invented; and it's **disconfirmed** by early polemics that argue theft, not displacement.

Wrong Tomb. Again, **scope** is narrow; **power** is feeble since the error was easily falsifiable in Jerusalem and women had **already observed the burial location**; **plausibility** is low because Joseph's prominent tomb was known; it's **ad hoc** in selectively trimming the narrative; and it is **disconfirmed** by the early, sober empty-tomb tradition.

Hallucination (incl. "spiritual resurrection," cognitive dissonance, and social-memory takes). Strongest of the naturalistic set, but still **fails scope** (no tomb), and **power** (no precedent for **group** experiences of identical content, across settings, including **skeptics/enemies**). Within a **Jewish** frame, bereavement visions would suggest **assumption** or heavenly vindication, **not** bodily resurrection **in history**. Psychoanalytic reconstructions of Peter/Paul are speculative (**implausible**) and **contrived**, and the hypothesis collides with **accepted beliefs** about the nature of hallucinations and Paul's pre-Christian psychology.

Legend / Social Memory. The decisive blow is **time**: the **1 Cor 15** tradition and pre-Markan Passion material are **within years**, not generations. That earliness torpedoes legendary drift. The hypothesis

therefore has poor **power** against the earliest strata, requires **ad hoc** selectivity (e.g., discarding embarrassment details like female witnesses), and is **disconfirmed** by the speed and locale (Jerusalem) of the proclamation under hostile scrutiny.

Twin / Impersonator. Starves on **scope** (no tomb), lacks **power** (intimate disciples repeatedly fooled? tactile wounds? meals?), and is almost comically **implausible** (no evidence of a twin; how were wounds replicated?). It is **contrived** to the hilt and **disconfirmed** by family lists and by the conversions of **James** and **Paul**.

Alien / Tech. Offers faux **scope** (anything could be "explained" by omnipotent tech) but zero **power** (no reason for the **distinctively Jewish** shape of the claim), near-zero **plausibility** (no independent evidence; anachronism), is maximally **contrived**, and is **disconfirmed** by the basic constraints of historical method.

But let us press the argument one step further. Suppose the disciples were not simply "left on their own" after the crucifixion. Suppose, instead, that Jesus' tomb was somehow discovered empty and that the shock of this discovery triggered hallucinations of Jesus among the disciples. Would they, under those conditions, have concluded that he had been raised from the dead? Those assumptions are already riddled with difficulties, of course; but let us grant them for the sake of argument. Even then, would the disciples have inferred Jesus' resurrection?

The answer is almost certainly *no*. Hallucinations, being mental projections, cannot introduce genuinely new content. In light of prevailing Jewish beliefs about life after death, any hallucinations of Jesus would therefore have portrayed him not as resurrected, but as exalted in heaven—dwelling in Abraham's bosom or with the righteous dead awaiting the final resurrection. And such visions would not have generated belief in a resurrection.

At most, the disciples would have concluded that Jesus had been *translated* or *assumed* into heaven, not raised from the dead. As we've seen, in the Old Testament, figures like Enoch and Elijah were described as having been taken up bodily into heaven without experiencing death. Likewise, in the extra-canonical *Testament of Job*, two children killed in a house collapse are described as having been translated to heaven: their bodies vanish beneath the rubble, and their

mother sees them glorified in heaven, taken there directly by God. Crucially, in Jewish thought, **translation** and **resurrection** are not interchangeable. Translation means the bodily assumption of a person out of this world into heaven; resurrection means the raising of a dead person back to embodied life in this spacetime world. They are entirely distinct categories.

Thus, given Jewish beliefs regarding translation and resurrection, disciples who experienced heavenly visions of Jesus would not have proclaimed his resurrection. At most, an empty tomb combined with hallucinations would have led them to announce that Jesus had been translated into heavenly glory—an interpretation that fit neatly within their Jewish conceptual framework. But it would *not* have led them to proclaim that Jesus had been *raised from the dead*, a claim that contradicted Jewish expectations on at least two major fronts.

The fact remains: the origin of Christianity is grounded in the earliest disciples' conviction that God had raised Jesus bodily from the dead. That conviction cannot be plausibly explained through Christian, pagan, or Jewish influences. Even granting—for argument's sake alone—that the tomb was mysteriously emptied and that hallucinations occurred (both of which we have already seen to be implausible), these conditions still fail to account for the rise of the resurrection belief. Such a scenario would have produced belief in Jesus' translation, not in his resurrection. Therefore, the emergence of the Christian faith is unintelligible unless Jesus *actually* rose from the dead.

The Positive Case by IBE: Why the Resurrection Hypothesis Wins

Explanatory Scope. It alone naturally unifies all the data: the empty tomb, the variegated appearances (to individuals, groups, friends, foes), and the explosive emergence of resurrection faith in Jerusalem, plus the conversions of James and Paul. No patchwork is needed.

Explanatory Power. If God raised Jesus, then an empty tomb, repeated post-mortem encounters, transformed courage, and unexpected conversions are exactly what one would predict. What is wildly improbable under conspiracy, swoon, legend, or hallucination becomes straightforward under resurrection.

Plausibility (historical + philosophical context). Historically, Jesus' unparalleled life and claims (authority to forgive sins, personal intimacy with the Father, kingdom embodiment) make divine vindication by resurrection fitting. Philosophically, once one admits the existence of God (as established earlier in Part I via the Modal Argument from Beginnings and corroborating considerations), a singular act of public revelation in raising Jesus is eminently plausible—not less plausible than rivals, but more.

Less-Contrived. Rivals multiply speculative patches (coordinated lies, medical marvel survival, unknown twin, mass multi-modal hallucinations, secret displacements, etc.). By contrast, the Resurrection Hypothesis posits one cause sufficient for the whole evidential field. And invoking a new entity is not "cheating": in every mature domain, postulating entities or causes is warranted when they increase explanatory success (the way quarks or black holes did in physics).

Not Disconfirmed by Accepted Beliefs. The generalization "dead people don't rise *naturally*" is compatible with "**God** raised Jesus." The hypothesis collides with no secure background belief; the **rivals** do (e.g., instability of conspiracies; lethality of crucifixion; nature of hallucinations; tempo of legend).

Comparative Superiority. Taking all five prior criteria together, the Resurrection Hypothesis dominates. It is not merely a little better; it is systemically better—across scope, power, plausibility, parsimony, and coherence—than every naturalistic competitor. In IBE terms, that is precisely what licenses rational acceptance of an explanation, even when it is singular.

Anticipating the "Miracle A Priori" Objection

One often-heard pushback is methodological: "History can't infer miracles." But that is not a neutral rule; it simply **begs the question** against the data when miracle is the **best** explanation. Historians routinely infer **unique**, **non-repeatable** causes (the Big Bang; the origin of life; singular political decisions) because those causes exhibit **explanatory virtues**. If God exists (as argued in Part I), then there is no **in-principle** bar to a divine act in history. The proper methodological posture is **epistemic openness**: follow the evidence to the best explanation under clear criteria. On those criteria, **resurrection** wins.

Where This Leaves the Argument

With the field cleared and the comparison complete, the conclusion is now stark: if we are not ruled by an *a priori* naturalism, the Resurrection Hypothesis is the most adequate historical explanation of the relevant facts. It has the widest scope, the strongest power, is fittingly plausible given Jesus' life and theism, is least contrived, and conflicts with no secure background beliefs—while each naturalistic rival fails at multiple points.

Concluding Remarks

There are two ways to move through reality: as though it is an accident waiting to be explained away, or as though it is a story waiting to be understood. Across these pages we have pursued the second way—with the tools of careful logic and the humility of historical attention. Part I asked the oldest philosophical questions in the most disciplined modern form and found that the mansion of modal space points, not to endless contingency, but to a necessary, efficacious Mind—one whose existence anchors and explains the finite, the fragile, and the first. Part II listened to the record of events at the hinge of history and found, not myth or wishful thinking, but a convergence of early data that is best explained by resurrection rather than re-description. The result is not a leap into the dark, but a step into the light: reason and record cohere.

This coherence matters. The argument from beginnings shows that "something like God" is not a decorative add-on but a structural necessity: a concrete, immaterial, timeless, volitional source with intelligence sufficient to underwrite the rational order we inhabit. That conclusion does not compel a particular theology, but it decisively re-weights the scales on which we place every other possibility. If reality is fundamentally personal, then the background probability of special, purposive action is not vanishingly small—it is live. And when the historical evidence then supplies an empty tomb, multiply attested appearances, and the sudden, public birth of a movement oriented around those claims, we are not stacking sentiment on sentiment; we are letting one strength confirm another. Prior metaphysics removes the principled barrier. Responsible historiography supplies the positive case. Together, they form a cord not easily broken.

To be sure, mystery remains. But mystery is not the enemy of knowledge; it is what knowledge faithfully guarded looks like at the

edges. The same modesty that refuses to pretend omniscience also refuses to call ignorance "explanation." We did not ask our arguments to do what arguments cannot—coerce consent. We asked them to do what arguments can—clarify options, expose hidden assumptions, and show where the evidence points when we are honest about what we know and candid about what we don't. On that standard, the combined force of Parts I and II delivers a verdict of surprising simplicity: the world looks and behaves as though it issues from, and has been *visited* by, a transcendent Mind.

What follows from that is not a smug certainty but a summons—to intellectual integrity, moral seriousness, and practical hope. Intellectual integrity because it is easier to doubt than to do the work that makes doubt precise; moral seriousness because truth is not merely to be admired but obeyed; practical hope because if the deepest thing about reality is love expressed in action, then despair is a misreading of the evidence. It is an invitation to live as participants in a world that is intelligible because it is intended, and redeemable because it has already been engaged. The modal map tells us that Meaning is not a latecomer; the historical record tells us Meaning has a name and leaves footprints.

Perhaps, even after traversing this long road of evidence—from the necessity of a Mind to the history of the empty tomb—you still find yourself unconvinced. You may be standing at the threshold, feeling the weight of the arguments but not yet seeing the light of certainty. If that is where you are, please know: that is entirely okay. Belief is rarely a switch we flip; more often, it is a dawn that breaks slowly. Honest hesitation is not a failure; it is a sign that you understand the gravity of what is being proposed. So, do not force an assent you do not feel.

But I ask you—I implore you—do not let the search end here. Do not turn away simply because the answer is difficult or the worldview shift is vast. If there is even a splinter of a chance that this is true—that the Author of reality has entered our history to conquer death and offer a love that cannot be lost—then that possibility is worth every ounce of your curiosity and courage. The stakes are too high, and the potential for hope is too great, to cast this aside lightly. Keep asking. Keep knocking. The truth can withstand your scrutiny. But ultimately, the evidence can only bring you to the door; the choice to step through remains, as it must, yours alone.

So let this final word be simple: live as though reality is charged with purpose—because it is. Let your mind be as rigorous as the arguments you have just read, and your heart as open as the history they illuminate. Ask your most difficult questions; this vision can bear the weight. If there is, at bedrock, a Necessary Mind who acts in love and truth, then none of our labors are wasted, none of our losses are final, and none of our hopes are naïve. We are, each of us, invited into alignment with the grain of the real—called to seek, to find, and to be found.

I do not claim to have said the last word. I only hope to have cleared the ground for a better hearing of the First Word—and to have shown why, on both rational and historical grounds, it is wise and good to answer. May your answering be thoughtful, courageous, and kind. It was always part of **The Universal Plan.**

Μετὰ ψυχῆς ἀκαταδάμαστου,

—Sam Nemri

Appendix

Part A – A (very brief) Overview of the Minimal Facts

The evidential core for the resurrection stands on (mostly) three independently secured facts: the empty tomb, the post-mortem appearances, and the sudden rise of the earliest Christian proclamation in Jerusalem that God had raised Jesus bodily from the dead. If these three facts are well supported, and if rival natural explanations fail to account for them with equal scope, power, and plausibility, then it is rational to judge the resurrection to be the best explanation of the data.

Begin with the empty tomb. The most direct route to it is through the burial. If Jesus was in fact buried in a known tomb in Jerusalem, then both friends and foes knew where that tomb was, and the claim that he had been raised could not have survived while a corpse lay in place. It would have been alien to Jewish thinking to affirm resurrection while a body remained in a grave; had the disciples tried it, no one in Jerusalem would have believed them, and the authorities could have ended the nascent movement by identifying the body. Hence a genuine burial strongly implies a genuine vacancy. The burial, in turn, enjoys unusually early and multiple attestation. Mark's Passion narrative draws on a pre-Markan source that most specialists date within the 30s, and the Pauline creed of 1 Corinthians 15:3–5—received by Paul no later than his AD 36 Jerusalem visit—explicitly includes "he was buried" as part of an early formula summarizing death, burial, resurrection "on the third day," and appearances. The burial by Joseph of Arimathea is multiply and independently reported in Matthew and Luke (which share non-Markan wording), in John (independent of the Synoptics), and is reflected in Acts' early preaching. The figure of Joseph—a wealthy Sanhedrist from the very council that condemned Jesus—is precisely the sort of witness Christians would not invent; as Raymond Brown observed, that makes the story "very probable." From so broad and early a base, the step to an empty tomb is short.

The emptiness itself is likewise multiply and early attested. The burial and tomb discovery form a seamless linguistic unit in Mark's pre-gospel source; the early creed Paul cites presupposes a vacated grave in

two ways: for first-century Jews, “buried…raised” entailed that the grave was left empty, and the dating “on the third day” most plausibly reflects the day the tomb was discovered empty. Matthew carries independent tradition, evident in non-Matthean vocabulary and in the guard story that responds to a live Jewish counter-claim; Luke adds an independent verification visit by male disciples; John again reports the empty tomb in an account widely regarded as independent of the Synoptics; and Acts contrasts David’s occupied tomb with “this Jesus God raised.” Mark’s phrase “the first day of the week” is awkward Greek that retro-translates naturally into Aramaic and almost certainly predates the “third day” formula, another clue that we are dealing with very early Palestinian tradition. The character of Mark’s narrative is strikingly sober: no description of Jesus exiting the tomb, no theological embroidery, simply a brief angelic interpretation—nothing like the later Gospel of Peter’s giant Jesus, cosmic angels, and talking cross. Most telling of all is the role of women as principal witnesses. In a culture where women’s testimony was widely discounted, making them the discoverers helps no apologetic purpose; the simplest explanation is that they were the discoverers. Attempts to explain their presence away—e.g., that Mark needed a device to explain why the empty tomb was unknown—are contrived and ignore that oral tradition has no qualms about bending facts when it wants to, whereas here the awkwardness remains. Finally, the earliest Jewish polemic presupposes emptiness: Matthew responds to the allegation that the disciples stole the body. Whatever one makes of the guard story, “they stole the body” is not what you say if a body is still in a tomb. On these cumulative grounds, it is unsurprising that broad majorities in the literature accept the empty tomb’s historicity; even Jewish scholars such as Lapide and Vermes have granted it.

The second fact concerns the appearances. Here the bedrock is Paul’s list in 1 Corinthians 15:3–8. Paul relays a Jerusalem tradition and appends his own eyewitness status. He names Cephas/Peter; the Twelve; more than five hundred at once, most of whom, he notes, are still alive—a rhetorical invitation to check that he would not risk unless such witnesses existed; James, Jesus’ brother; “all the apostles” (a wider missionary circle); and finally Paul himself, at the time a hostile persecutor. These entries are not airy theology: Paul spent two weeks with Peter three years after his own experience; he knew the Twelve; he interacted with James; and he staked his ministry on the reality of what he and they had encountered. The Gospels independently attest several of the same appearances: Peter (Luke 24:34), the Twelve (Luke 24; John 20) with concrete, tactile demonstrations that establish

corporeality and continuity, the women (Matthew 28; John 20), and Galilean encounters (predicted in Mark, narrated in Matthew 28 and John 21). Arranged chronologically, the pattern Jerusalem → Galilee → Jerusalem maps onto the pilgrimage calendar from Passover toward Pentecost. Even prominent skeptics concede the core: different individuals and groups had experiences in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ. The remaining question is what sort of experiences these were.

Two considerations point to bodily, world-external encounters rather than private inner visions. First is Paul's own resurrection doctrine. In 1 Corinthians 15 he contrasts the present body, dominated by frail human nature ("natural," psychikos), with the future body empowered by God's Spirit ("spiritual," pneumatikos). "Spiritual" here does not mean immaterial; it names the body's new mode—Spirit-directed—rather than its substance. Paul is not teaching disembodied immortality; he is presupposing transformed embodiment, and he grounds the Christian hope in Christ's own resurrection as the firstfruits. Second is the New Testament's conceptual distinction between appearances and visions. Appearances are public, world-external events open in principle to shared perception; visions are wholly intra-mental, even if God-given (Stephen's vision in Acts 7, seen by him alone, is the paradigm). Paul can class his Damascus-road encounter as an appearance because there were external manifestations experienced to varying degrees by his companions. The Gospels, for their part, unanimously present embodied encounters—touch, wounds, meals—with no trace of a supposed earlier, purely "visionary" phase that later "materialized." If such a phase had existed, we would expect at least some memory of it. We have none.

The third fact is the origin and shape of the Christian movement. From the start, the church's kerygma was not a vague "Jesus lives on," nor a mere exaltation claim, but that God raised Jesus from the dead and he appeared. That proclamation reversed the public disaster of crucifixion: a crucified would-be messiah was, by definition, a failed pretender. Yet in a matter of weeks Jesus was proclaimed as both Lord and Messiah—openly, in Jerusalem, under the noses of those who had engineered his death. This was not the distinctive theology of one faction; it was the common foundation across the earliest communities. What could have generated that conviction?

It did not arise from "Christian influence," because Christianity did not exist to influence anyone until this belief produced it. It did not arise

from pagan mythology. Proposed parallels either describe apotheoses (Romulus), political divinizations (Julius Caesar), disappearances into a higher realm (Apollonius), or seasonal fertility cycles (Osiris/Tammuz). None matches the Jewish idea of a one-off, bodily resurrection within history; specialists in ancient religion emphasize the category mistake, and Palestinian Jews regarded such cults as abhorrent. Nor did it arise from Jewish expectation. Jewish resurrection hope was overwhelmingly eschatological and collective: it concerned the resurrection of the dead at the end of the age, not the isolated resurrection of a single person in advance of the rest, and certainly not of a crucified claimant to messiahship. That is why Martha hears "your brother will rise" and thinks of "the last day," and why the disciples puzzle over Jesus' prediction of rising before Elijah's coming. Second-Temple texts do not speak of a messiah raised ahead of the general resurrection; when messianic movements failed, their followers did not salvage the claim by asserting resurrection. In this context, even the common fallback—suppose there were an empty tomb and subjective visions—still fails to explain the *shape* of the earliest proclamation. Given Jewish categories, such a mix would most naturally be read as assumption or translation into heavenly glory (as with Enoch and Elijah, or the *Testament of Job*'s vanished children), not as resurrection within space-time. The content of the earliest Christian message therefore remains unexplained unless Jesus truly rose.

These three facts stand up under the same criteria historians use everywhere else. Multiple independent attestation is abundant: the burial and tomb in pre-Markan tradition, the early creed, Matthew/Luke/John/Acts; appearances in Paul plus multiple Gospel lines; the origin of the proclamation across the New Testament. Dissimilarity is evident in the unprecedented shape of a claim that the crucified Messiah had been bodily raised within history—unlike prior Judaism and unlike pagan mythology. Embarrassment surfaces in a Sanhedrist providing the burial and in women as first witnesses to the tomb. Contextual credibility is strong: the narratives fit first-century Jewish burial practice, and the proclamation's Jerusalem setting allowed hostile verification. Semitic traces mark both the creed and the empty-tomb phrasing ("the first day of the week"). Cause–effect reasoning favors resurrection: the conversions of James and Paul, the earliest Jewish theft claim, and the disciples' transformation all demand causes robust enough to produce them. Principles of embellishment cut in favor of Mark's restraint over the Gospel of Peter's extravagance. And the coherence among all three facts—an empty grave, embodied

appearances, and a movement whose earliest message was bodily resurrection—forms a mutually reinforcing triad.

The standard objections do not overturn this convergence. Saying "history cannot infer miracles" is not a historical conclusion but a philosophical veto. Historians routinely infer singular, non-repeatable causes when they best explain the evidence. If God exists—as argued earlier in the book—then divine action is not an illicit posit. The charge that Paul "doesn't mention the empty tomb" ignores how his creed presupposes it conceptually and temporally. Dismissing Matthew's guard pericope as apologetic does not touch the datum that the earliest Jewish counter-claim already assumes the tomb was empty. The absence of a tomb-shrine is exactly what one expects if no remains were there to venerate. And the "legend" suggestion stumbles on timing: the creed lies within a handful of years, the Passion source in the 30s, the proclamation is made in the very city where checks were possible, and the narratives retain awkward features that later legend would smooth away. The legendary "rate" required would be, in the judgment of classicists, unbelievable.

Taken together, the empty tomb, the appearances, and the origin of Easter faith form a convergent case that is early, multiply attested, culturally congruent, and explanatorily potent. Assessing the live hypotheses by the usual historical virtues—explanatory scope and power, plausibility in context, parsimony, and harmony with background knowledge—resurrection uniquely succeeds where naturalistic rivals falter. If one does not exclude divine action a priori, the best explanation of the facts remains the one the earliest Christians staked everything on: God raised Jesus from the dead, and they saw him.

Part B – Historical Methodology and the Use of Criteria

Any responsible case for (or against) the resurrection must begin with method, not conclusions. The New Testament writings should be handled the same way historians treat other ancient texts: neither as automatically inerrant nor as automatically unreliable, but as ordinary first-century sources to be weighed with standard tools. Those tools are not exotic. They include establishing the text, situating each document in its literary genre and historical setting, tracing lines of dependence and independence among sources, and then applying well-worn criteria—multiple independent attestation, embarrassment, dissimilarity (or unexpectedness), coherence, linguistic and cultural congruence, and causal adequacy—to test particular claims. None of these on its own compels a verdict; together they function like a series of cross-checks that raise or lower the probability of discrete pieces of evidence and, more importantly, of a proposed explanation for the whole. The point of this appendix is to make that process explicit and to show how, when followed consistently, it yields a tight evidential core for the resurrection data without presupposing a special view of Scripture—and how, once the philosophical groundwork of Part I is granted (that a Necessary Mind exists and can act), the resurrection hypothesis becomes not a gap-stopper but the best overall explanation.

Method begins with the text we are actually assessing. Textual criticism asks whether we possess what the authors wrote closely enough to make historical judgments. Here the New Testament fares at least as well as, and usually far better than, other ancient literature: an unusually thick manuscript tradition; multiple early witnesses; and a mature critical apparatus that allows scholars to identify and bracket later additions or corruptions. This does not mean the text is flawless; it means we are not arguing in a fog. We can delineate the wording of, say, 1 Corinthians 15:3–7 or the Markan passion narrative with a precision sufficient for historical work. That "floor" matters, because probabilities in history collapse if the text itself is radically indeterminate. It is not.

The next step is literary and historical situating. The Gospels read most naturally as Greco-Roman *bioi*—ancient biographies that aim to present a subject's deeds and teaching with theological or moral interests, yes, but with a recognizable historical spine. Acts is historiography with a focus on the early movement's expansion. Paul's undisputed letters are letters—occasional, argumentative, and datable

within a decade or two of Jesus' death. Dating and genre are not mere preliminaries. When sources cluster within living memory, in the same locales where the events occurred, legendary displacement becomes progressively harder, and cross-examination by friend and foe becomes more plausible. In this respect the resurrection material is unusual: we have a pre-Pauline tradition he "received" and "passed on," embedded in a letter written roughly two decades after the crucifixion, which itself almost certainly crystallized within a few years of the events; we have passion material used by Mark that many specialists push very early; and we have independent streams in Matthew/Luke and John. That temporal proximity—combined with the movement's explosive, public launch in Jerusalem—sets stiff constraints on what sort of explanations will be historically workable.

With text and setting in place, historians map dependence and independence. This matters because "two sources saying the same thing" helps only if they did not simply copy one another. Independence here is never absolute, but it is often good enough: Paul's creedal summary is not derived from our written Gospels; the speeches in Acts, while stylized, preserve early proclamation that resonates with but does not parrot the evangelists; John's tradition frequently shows awareness of, but independence from, Synoptic formulations; and Matthew/Luke, while indebted to Mark, also bear non-Markan material on the burial and appearances. Independence is also signaled by the very *shape* of narrative overlap and divergence: the same core anchored by different incidental detail is precisely what one expects from multiple memories of the same events and is suspiciously unlike collusion.

At that point the classic criteria come into play. *Multiple independent attestation* has exceptional force in the resurrection case. The burial/empty-tomb sequence is not a single late tale: pre-Markan passion material, Paul's creed (whose "he was buried … he was raised … he appeared" aligns neatly with the burial/empty-tomb/appearance pattern), distinct Synoptic seams, Johannine narrative, and the early Jerusalem kerygma in Acts converge. The appearance claims enjoy the same: Paul lists individuals and groups (Peter, the Twelve, 500, James, "all the apostles," himself), and at least some of these have independent narrative counterparts in Luke and John. The very *diversity* of settings—indoors and outdoors, in Jerusalem and Galilee, to friends and a former enemy—plays against the notion of a single imaginative template slowly elaborated by the same community. If you adopted this density of independent attestation for episodes in Alexander's or

Caesar's careers—and historians do—you would treat those episodes as historically well grounded. Consistency demands the same here.

Embarrassment tests whether a feature is so awkward for the early movement that it is unlikely to have been invented. Two striking pieces meet this test. First, the women as principal discoverers of the empty tomb in a culture that commonly discounted women's testimony: if you were crafting apologetic fiction, you would not lead with witnesses your contemporaries regarded as weak. Second, Joseph of Arimathea—a member of the council that, in Christian memory, condemned Jesus—performing an honorable burial: that places a hostile elite in a positive role, the opposite of what a propagandist would concoct. Add to these the disciples' fear, flight, and initial doubts, all conserved in the tradition in ways that hardly flatter the founding leaders. The more a hypothesis must *explain away* rather than *explain* embarrassment, the weaker it becomes.

Dissimilarity (or unexpectedness) is frequently misused when abstracted from context, but carefully applied it has bite. Within Second Temple Judaism "resurrection" denoted bodily raising at the end of the age, not the mid-history vindication of a single executed messianic claimant. The earliest proclamation—"God has raised Jesus"—is thus not a straightforward projection of prior expectation. Nor is it a late doctrinal gloss: the earliest strata already speak this way. Exactly because it is *not* the most culturally convenient claim, its early ubiquity counts in favor of authenticity. Used cautiously, this criterion blocks easy appeals to generic mythmaking while steering us back to the Jewish matrix in which the claim first made sense: the God of Israel has acted.

Coherence tests how well individual items fit with material already judged authentic. Here the interlocking is unusually tight. Paul's robust "resurrection-of-the-body" theology (not mere immortality of the soul) coheres with physical, public appearances and with an empty tomb. The conversions of James and Paul—one a skeptical family insider, the other an active opponent—cohere with appearances not limited to sympathetic bereaved disciples. The launch of a resurrection proclamation in Jerusalem coheres with a missing corpse there. One may reject any of these individually; rejecting the *pattern* becomes progressively costly.

Linguistic and cultural congruence protects against anachronism. Semitic substrata and early idioms—e.g., the awkward Greek phrase "the first day of the week," which renders naturally back into Aramaic—signal that we are not reading free-floating Greek theology but tradition formed in a Palestinian milieu. Burial details align with what archaeology and Jewish sources tell us of first-century interment and lament practice. Polemical exchanges align with Jewish–Christian friction we would expect in Jerusalem: the earliest counterclaim is not "there is a body in a tomb you can visit" but "the disciples stole the body," which concedes the vacancy of the grave and moves the dispute to an explanation of that datum. Enemy attestation of this sort is historically potent precisely because it is adversarial.

Effect (or causal adequacy) asks whether a proposed cause is sufficient for the historical consequences that plainly followed. Whatever happened turned frightened followers into public witnesses willing to face imprisonment and death; propelled Jesus' own skeptical brother into leadership of the Jerusalem church; converted an enemy into its chief missionary; and generated an early, bodily resurrection proclamation in the very city of the crucifixion. A cause that cannot plausibly produce those effects—say, a lone bereavement vision, or a half-dead survivor limping out of a tomb—fails this test. The principle here is not theological; it is the ordinary historical maxim that a sufficient cause must be commensurate with the observed effect.

A word about *minor divergences* and *undesigned interlockings*. Witnesses to real events typically agree on the core and differ in incidentals. If four accounts reproduced each other verbatim, we would suspect collusion. What we actually see is a recognizable core with differences in peripheral detail—order, emphasis, wording—that is exactly what independent memory looks like. Often those differences subtly interlock: one source raises a question another incidentally answers without intending to. Historians do not over-read such "undesigned coincidences," but they treat them as mild indicators of authenticity and independence.

What, then, of *oral tradition* and memory? Modern studies of memory in traditional cultures show that orally transmitted material can be both flexible at the edges and firm at the core—especially where communities care deeply about preservation, where material is deliberately framed for memorization, and where named witnesses function as reference points. The earliest Christians fit that profile. The creedal cadence of 1 Corinthians 15 ("that Christ died … and that he

was buried … and that he was raised … and that he appeared …"), the repetition of key names (Cephas/Peter, the Twelve, James), and the habit of singling out locales ("in Galilee," "in Jerusalem") all look like early, structured proclamation. That does not immunize the tradition from development; it does mean blanket appeals to "social memory" cannot simply dissolve robust, early, multiply attested cores.

All of this feeds into *inference to the best explanation*. Historians, like scientists, rarely enjoy deductive certainty. They choose the hypothesis that best balances scope (how much it explains), power (how well it makes the evidence expected), plausibility (fit with background knowledge), parsimony (fewest unsupported add-ons), and freedom from conflict with well-established facts. On those criteria, the naturalistic rivals struggle: conspiracy theories collapse under psychology and under the disciples' costly sincerity; swoon scenarios collide with Roman execution practice and fail to generate the triumphant faith we actually see; wrong-tomb and displaced-body proposals are narrow in scope and brittle under Jewish burial custom and early polemic; legend requires time and distance the sources do not give; hallucination must be multiplied (and diversified) into unprecedented, coordinated group experiences—including skeptics and an enemy—*and* paired with a second hypothesis to cover the empty tomb, all while swimming against the current of Jewish expectation, which would more naturally have produced claims of heavenly assumption rather than bodily resurrection within history. By contrast, "God raised Jesus" unifies the data without contrivance and makes the pattern positively *expected* if there is a God who might vindicate Jesus' radical life and claims.

At this juncture the groundwork of Part I matters. Historical method does not prove theism; philosophical argument can render it rational. If reality is grounded in a Necessary Mind capable of acting, then the old "history-can't-infer-miracle" veto is not a methodological necessity but a metaphysical prejudice. Historians regularly infer singular, non-repeatable causes when those best explain public evidence. A theistic background removes the a priori stranglehold Humean objections wield; it raises the *prior* that a unique act of divine self-disclosure could occur at the hinge of a uniquely significant life. In that light, the resurrection hypothesis is neither an appeal to ignorance nor a trump card but a straightforward application of IBE: among live competitors, it alone exhibits superior scope, power, plausibility, parsimony, and fit.

Two cautions complete the picture. First, criteria can be misused. "Dissimilarity," detached from context, can become a license to accept only what surprises us; the right use is comparative: unexpectedness relative to both antecedent Judaism and later Christian theology can weigh in favor of authenticity, but it is never absolute. Second, method must avoid both over-harmonization and hyper-skepticism. We need not sandpaper every wrinkle between accounts; neither should we magnify minor tensions into disproofs of substance. The historian's art lives in the middle: granular weighing, cumulative judgment, and open comparison of rival explanations under shared standards.

Put together, this is why the resurrection case can be mounted without special pleading. The documents are close enough in time and stable enough in text to permit inquiry; their genre and setting give them the same prima facie credibility we afford other ancient sources; the key claims clear multiple, independent criteria; oral-cultural dynamics explain both the stiffness of the core and the flexibility of incidentals; the effects demand a cause proportionate to them; and, given the philosophical backdrop argued in Part I, the "divine vindication" hypothesis is no methodological outlier. The upshot is not certainty—for historians almost never get that—but a robust, public, and rationally compelling case that the resurrection hypothesis best explains the data we actually have.

Part C – Survey of Scholarship

A striking feature of contemporary New Testament study is that, after two centuries of rigorous criticism, a wide, cross-confessional center of gravity has emerged on the bedrock facts surrounding Easter—even among scholars who do not themselves confess the resurrection. This is not a matter of "apologist versus skeptic" talking past each other; it reflects repeated, public, peer-facing judgments about early sources, genre, chronology, and historical method. The center holds firm on at least these points: Jesus of Nazareth existed; he was executed by crucifixion under Pontius Pilate; he was buried; very soon thereafter, individuals and groups of his followers sincerely believed they had encounters with him alive again; the earliest proclamation announcing this conviction sprang up in Jerusalem and spread rapidly; within that proclamation, a tight, pre-Pauline formula (1 Cor 15:3–7) crystallized within a handful of years; and key skeptics—James, the brother of Jesus, and Saul/Paul the persecutor—were abruptly won over by what they took to be appearances of the risen Jesus. On these items you will find agreement from historians as diverse as E. P. Sanders, James D. G. Dunn, N. T. Wright, Larry Hurtado, Dale Allison, Bart Ehrman, Géza Vermes, and even the atheist critic Gerd Lüdemann (who famously conceded that it is "historically certain" that Peter and the disciples had experiences in which Jesus appeared to them as risen). Disagreement remains, of course—most sharply over the nature of those experiences and whether historians may infer divine action—but the convergence on the "what" to be explained is unusually strong by the standards of ancient history.

The backbone of this convergence is the dating and independence of our earliest sources. The undisputed Pauline letters are universally placed in the 50s CE, within twenty years of the crucifixion, and 1 Corinthians 15:3–7 is almost unanimously treated as a tradition Paul "received" earlier—very plausibly in the mid-30s, when he first consulted Cephas (Peter) and James in Jerusalem. Dunn, Hurtado, Jeremias, Wilckens, and Wright—stretching from cautious to confessional—concur that this creed carries us back within a few years of Jesus' death. That matters: it compresses the window for wholesale legendary development and situates the resurrection proclamation inside the lifetime, locales, and memory-space of both adherents and opponents. The passion narrative embedded in Mark is likewise pushed early by a wide array of German, British, and American scholars; and while Matthew and Luke use Mark, they also carry non-Markan material on the burial and appearances, while John supplies an

independent line of tradition that frequently intersects the Synoptic core without obviously depending upon it. Add to this the speeches in Acts, which—though literary—echo the same primitive pattern ("you killed him … God raised him … we are witnesses"), and the result is not a single late source but multiple, converging streams from the first generation.

On the empty tomb, the center of gravity is a strong majority rather than unanimity. Surveys of the academic literature (e.g., Gary Habermas's multi-decade audits) consistently report that most scholars writing on the subject judge the empty tomb tradition to be historical, with support drawn from its early attestation, its embedding in the burial narrative, the awkward prominence of women as chief discoverers, and the trajectory of early Jewish polemic, which assumes a missing body and argues theft rather than pointing the movement to an occupied grave. Jewish historians like Pinchas Lapide judged the evidence for the empty tomb impressive (Lapide went so far as to accept Jesus' resurrection as an act of Israel's God while remaining Jewish); other critical voices—Michael Grant, C. E. B. Cranfield, and many more—have argued that, judged by the same criteria used elsewhere in classical studies, the case for the empty tomb is historically weighty. Skeptical scholars such as Ehrman or Vermes are more reserved: they tend to treat the appearances as better established than the empty tomb, but they do not deny that a strong historical argument can be made for the tomb's vacancy. What is absent in the center of the guild is any serious uptake of "wrong tomb" or "displaced body" theories; such proposals are widely regarded as narrow in scope and brittle under the evidence of early tradition and Jewish burial practice.

On the appearances, the consensus is stronger still. Almost across the board, critical scholars affirm that multiple individuals and groups—preeminently Peter, the Twelve, and others—had experiences they interpreted as appearances of the risen Jesus. Lüdemann, Allison, Ehrman, and Sanders—all personally cautious about miracle claims—nonetheless underscore that these experiences must be granted as historical data because they are multiply attested, early, and connected to named persons who stood at the movement's core. The nature of those experiences is the point of dispute. Wright, Craig, Bauckham, Keener, and many Catholic and evangelical scholars argue for bodily, public encounters that cohere with a Jewish understanding of resurrection and with an empty tomb. Others, such as Lüdemann and (in a more nuanced key) Allison, propose that grief-, guilt-, or religion-

inflected visions best account for at least some of the appearances, while admitting that such reconstructions strain under the diversity (individuals and groups, friends and an enemy) and the movement's Jewish framework, which would more naturally have produced claims of heavenly "assumption" rather than mid-history resurrection. Importantly, even those who prefer visionary models typically acknowledge that purely subjective experiences cannot by themselves explain the rise of the bodily resurrection proclamation without additional historical factors. That acknowledgment marks the shared problem space: whatever explanation is offered must be strong enough to generate the kind of public, bodily resurrection proclamation we in fact see, in Jerusalem, immediately, under scrutiny.

The conversions of James and Paul function in the literature as hard-edged control points. Josephus confirms James's leadership and martyrdom; Paul's pre-Christian persecution and subsequent mission are bedrock. From Sanders to Dunn to Fredriksen to Wright, there is broad agreement that any viable hypothesis must make sense of these two trajectories. James was not a credulous outsider but a skeptical insider, a brother whose initial stance toward Jesus was negative; his elevation to leadership in Jerusalem begs for an event-level cause. Paul, for his part, was not psychologically primed to see what he eventually claimed; the "Damascus" encounter remains a datum that even critics who favor visionary categories must treat as an externally disruptive event with communal consequences. This is why, even in skeptical reconstructions, James and Paul are rarely explained by social contagion from the Galilean disciples; their vectors are too independent, their roles too central, and their prior commitments too strong to be absorbed by simple group dynamics.

Equally significant is the collapse, within mainstream scholarship, of the old "pagan-myth" parallel hunt as an explanation for Easter faith. From Jonathan Z. Smith to T. N. D. Mettinger (himself unusually open to "dying and rising gods" in a limited sense), the verdict is that whatever seasonal or apotheosis motifs existed in surrounding cultures do not map onto the Jewish, mid-history, bodily resurrection claimed for Jesus. The interpretive background for the earliest proclamation is Jewish eschatology, not Greco-Roman vegetation cults. This shift—often called the "Jewish reclamation" of Jesus—has been driven as much by skeptical historians as by believing ones, and it sharply narrows the menu of live explanations. When your background is late-Second-Temple Judaism, not comparative mythology, "resurrection" has a specific, bodily sense, and claims about one man's being raised

ahead of the general resurrection are recognized as unprecedented—hence in need of real historical accounting.

Assessments of Acts and Luke's historiography also push in the same direction. Archaeologists and historians (Ramsay in an earlier generation; more recently Colin Hemer and others) have documented Luke's accuracy on minor administrative titles, geography, and travel detail—hardly a direct proof of miracles, but a cumulative argument that, where testable, Luke tends to get things right. Classical historian A. N. Sherwin-White's oft-quoted observation about the pace of legendary accretion in antiquity—that wholesale legend does not typically swamp core history within a couple of generations—has been adopted by many who are otherwise critical of Christian claims, because it simply reflects how ancient historiography works. When applied to the resurrection traditions (which are earlier than that generational window), it raises the bar for "legendary development" as a blanket solution.

Where, then, do disagreements remain? Two large questions divide the guild. First: What is the historian permitted to conclude? Many historians—Ehrman is representative—adopt a methodological naturalism according to which "God raised Jesus" is not an admissible historical inference, however well it might fit the data, because divine agency cannot be weighed with ordinary historical tools. Others (Wright, Swinburne, Craig, Licona, and a spectrum of Catholic and Protestant scholars) argue that history routinely infers unique causes when warranted and that if a theistic worldview is at least live (as argued philosophically in Part I), the "no-miracles-in-history" veto is not methodologically neutral but metaphysically loaded. Second: How should the appearances be characterized? Here the line runs not between "believer" and "skeptic" but through both camps. Some believing scholars stress the bodily, public nature of the encounters in continuity with Jewish resurrection hope; some cautious scholars, like Allison, stress the complexity of visionary phenomena while still acknowledging that the sheer variety and communal spread of the Easter experiences are without close psychological parallel; others, like Lüdemann, posit visions rooted in grief or guilt but must then add auxiliary theses to account for their breadth and for the specifically *resurrectional* (not merely visionary) shape of the earliest proclamation. The point is not that there is unanimity, but that all competing reconstructions are compelled to reckon with the same stout bundle of early, public facts.

Finally, two clarifications help readers interpret “consensus” responsibly. First, consensus that certain facts occurred is not the same thing as consensus on the best explanation of those facts. The former is broadly shared: crucifixion, burial, rapid emergence of resurrection belief, named appearances, conversions of James and Paul, and the early creedal summary are standard fare in critical introductions. The empty tomb enjoys majority (not universal) support. The latter—what best explains them—remains contested largely because of differing metaphysical starting points, not because the historical scaffolding is weak. Second, the bar for “legend-only” explanations is, in the mainstream guild, higher than popular treatments suggest. Because the resurrection proclamation is documented in our earliest strata, and because it assumes rather than invents core features (bodily resurrection within a Jewish frame), attempts to dissolve Easter into myth have largely retreated from the center to the margins.

In sum, a candid survey of contemporary scholarship yields a picture that is both modest and remarkable. Modest—because professional historians are diverse in philosophical commitment and method, and few in secular settings will affirm “God raised Jesus” as a formal historical conclusion. Remarkable—because that same diverse guild has, by shared critical standards, delivered a compact set of early, stubborn facts that demand explanation: Jesus was crucified and buried; very soon, named individuals and groups—including former skeptics—were convinced they encountered him alive; an explosively public, bodily resurrection proclamation ignited in Jerusalem; and a pre-Pauline summary carrying these claims can be tracked to the movement’s first years. Where one goes from there will depend in part on whether Part I’s philosophical case for a Necessary Mind is granted. But what can no longer be responsibly said is that the historical floor is mushy. It is not. The scholarly middle has made it firm. If Part I is correct, the terrain is already laid out.

For many readers the decisive obstacle is not the history but the horizon behind it. “Miracles don’t happen,” we are told; therefore no amount of first-century testimony could ever license belief in one. That objection only succeeds, however, if its philosophy is already settled in advance—if reality is a closed, godless system in which every event is exhaustively produced by impersonal physical causes. Part I of this work undercut that presupposition. There we argued that the best explanation of the existence and intelligibility of the cosmos is a Necessary Mind with causal powers—personal agency whose will grounds the order we call “the laws of nature.” If that conclusion is even modestly probable, the status of miracles is transformed. They are no longer violations of nature by an alien force, but rare, purposive acts of the same personal source who continuously sustains nature. The question ceases to be “Can miracles occur?” and becomes “Did this miracle occur on this occasion, for good reasons, in a context that makes sense?” The historical case for the resurrection must then be weighed on its historical merits, not dismissed by fiat.

Much of the resistance here traces to David Hume’s celebrated critique. Hume defined a miracle as a violation of a law of nature and claimed that our “uniform experience” of the laws gives us always stronger evidence against any miracle than we could ever have for it. Both halves falter. First, the definition. On the classical theistic account, a “law” is a stable description of how created causes operate given ordinary conditions; it is not a metaphysical straitjacket on the First Cause. When an agent freely acts on a system—say, a musician striking a piano—the motion of the strings is not a “violation” of acoustics, but an *additional* cause operating within and upon the order those laws describe. Likewise, if God acts in nature, the event is not lawless; it has a lawful *profile* (bodies still fall, wounds still bleed) plus a higher-level cause that nature’s impersonal processes do not supply on their own (e.g., the reanimation and transformation of a corpse). Miracles are thus not intrusions from outside reality but personal actions by the Author within a story he is already writing line by line. Second, the claim about “uniform experience” is question-begging. If God exists and has ever acted, then experience is *not* uniform; and whether he has acted is precisely what is in dispute. Hume’s rule therefore smuggles in, as a premise, the very conclusion it wants to prove.

A better way to think about this is Bayesian. Prior to examining the Easter evidence (E), ask what the probability of a resurrection (R)

would be on two different backgrounds: theism (T) and naturalism (~T). On strict naturalism, *any* resurrection has prior probability essentially zero; no amount of historical evidence could ever dislodge it, because the hypothesis is ruled out a priori. On theism, by contrast—especially if Part I's case for a Necessary Mind with reasons to disclose himself stands—the prior is small but live. It is not "miracles everywhere," but "miracles are possible when purposive reasons are strong." Now update with the data: a well-evidenced burial and empty tomb, multiple early, multi-party appearances (including to skeptics and an enemy), and the explosive rise of bodily-resurrection proclamation in Jerusalem. On R & T, E is exactly the sort of pattern we would expect if God chose to vindicate Jesus uniquely; on any single naturalistic rival, much of E is astonishingly unlikely; and on the patchwork of multiple naturalistic add-ons (hallucinations *plus* body displacement *plus* perfect conspiratorial silence, etc.), the prior collapses under contrivance. In Bayesian terms, the likelihood ratio $P(E|R \,\&\, T)/P(E|\neg R \,\&\, \sim T)$ becomes very large, and the posterior for R given E and T rises accordingly. Hume's blanket veto gives way to ordinary historical reasoning: weigh hypotheses by explanatory scope, power, plausibility, parsimony, and fit with background knowledge.

But doesn't a miracle contradict "the laws"? Only if one assumes a mechanistic metaphysics that Part I has already unsettled. Laws, on a theistic account, are the regular habits of a contingent world continuously willed and intelligibly ordered by its Creator. They tell us what nature does *when left to itself*; they do not tell us what nature will do when its Author freely chooses to bring about a special sign for a redemptive purpose. In that sense, miracles are not "gaps in knowledge" but *additions of cause*. They do not erase physics; they *include* physics within a larger personal causality—just as your decision to raise your arm does not violate biomechanics but works *through* it. This reframing matters for history: the historian need not reproduce a miracle in a laboratory to judge it the best explanation of past data, any more than she must reproduce Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon. The question is whether the hypothesis, once admitted as possible, excels its rivals by the standard criteria historians actually use.

Hume also leaned heavily on the unreliability of testimony. People err, embellish, or deceive; religious movements breed credulity. All true—sometimes. That is why the Christian claim stubbornly locates itself where testimony is strongest and error is hardest to sustain: in proximate time (first-generation sources), in hostile territory (Jerusalem), with named witnesses (Peter, James, the Twelve;

eventually Paul), under public risk (persecution), across independent streams (Pauline creedal tradition; Mark's passion source; non-Markan material in Matthew and Luke; Johannine tradition; speeches in Acts). Yes, human testimony can be poor; but the *quality* and configuration of these particular witnesses is precisely what one asks for when testing ancient claims. Hume's general suspicion of testimony is a prudential rule; it is not a trump card against any specific, well-attested event—especially when rival, purely natural explanations repeatedly falter under the same evidential standards.

A different form of the objection says that "miracle" is not an explanation at all. It is a label placed where our understanding fails—"God of the gaps." That is a fair worry if invoking God merely interrupts inquiry. But the resurrection hypothesis is not ignorance wearing a halo; it is an inference to personal agency grounded in positive indicators: the fit with Jesus' unique life and claims; the purposive timing (Passover; messianic expectations), place (Jerusalem), and content (bodily resurrection within Israel's scriptural frame); the moral and existential transformation it unleashed; and the stubborn triad of facts (empty tomb, appearances, origin of the movement) for which naturalistic proposals repeatedly underperform. In other domains we happily infer agency when the pattern merits it. If stones on a beach spell *WELCOME HOME* in neat rows, we do not hunt for freak tides; we infer a mind. If Part I has already made a mind at the root of things more probable than not, then a singular, meaning-laden historical event that coheres with that mind's goals is not a gap but a *convergent* explanation.

Another anxiety is methodological: can historians, as historians, ever conclude "God acted"? Many adopt "methodological naturalism" as a professional rule of thumb and worry that to allow exceptions is to dissolve the discipline. Two clarifications help. First, historians already infer singular, non-repeatable causes when warranted: the Big Bang, the assassination that triggers a war, the once-off volcanic eruption that buries a city. What they require is not repeatability but explanatory virtues applied to public evidence. Second, a modest openness to special divine action need not collapse into credulity. It simply means that, if a theistic worldview is a live option (as argued in Part I), historians should not forbid, in advance, the conclusion that best meets their own criteria merely because it is theistic. The alternative is not neutrality but a covert metaphysical veto—one that pre-judges rather than adjudicates the case.

But perhaps one is dissatisfied with the analysis thus far and would like some concrete, objective criteria for the identification of a miracle. Stephen Bilynskyj provides the following criteria for identifying some event *E* as a miracle:

(1) The evidence for the occurrence of *E* is at least as good as it is for other acceptable but unusual events similarly distant in time and space from the point of the inquiry;

(2) An account of the natures and/or powers of the causally relevant natural agents, such that they could account for *E*, would be clumsy and *ad hoc*;

(3) There is no evidence, except the inexplicability of *E,* for one or more natural agents which could produce *E*;

(4) There is some justification for a supernatural explanation of *E*, independent of the inexplicability of *E.*[195]

These criteria seem quite correct. In fact, the resurrection of Jesus meets these criteria.[196] The reader is encouraged to critically test this himself.

Finally, context matters for plausibility. On bare theism, the prior for any miracle is small; on bare naturalism, it is zero. But the resurrection claim does not arise in a vacuum. It is tethered to a life and teaching that, by widespread scholarly admission, carried an unheard-of authority; to a self-understanding and a symbolic program (kingdom, forgiveness, table fellowship, temple sayings) that placed Jesus at the crest of Israel's story; and to announced intentions that something climactic would occur. If a God who is both righteous and self-revealing exists, then vindicating *this* person in *this* way at *this* juncture is not arbitrary. As Swinburne and Wright (from different angles) have argued, the prior becomes not merely *non-zero* but *fitting*. That does not force the conclusion; it frames it. And once framed, the cumulative, early, and multiply attested evidence for the empty tomb, the

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[195] Stephen S. Bilynskyj, "God, Nature, and the Concept of Miracle" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1982), p. 222.
[196] See William Lane Craig's Response to Question of the Week #687. https://www.reasonablefaith.org/question-answer/P20/are-we-justified-in-inferring-jesus-resurrection#_edn1

appearances, and the origin of the Easter proclamation no longer labors under a philosophical headwind. It can be heard for what it says.

In sum, the "big background objection" dissolves when the background changes. If Part I is sound—if reality is anchored in a Necessary Mind with reasons to communicate and redeem—then miracles are not category mistakes. They are rare, intelligible acts of personal agency within an ordered world. Under that background, the resurrection no longer faces a blanket veto; it faces the same adjudication any historical hypothesis faces. And by the historian's own standards—explanatory scope, power, plausibility in context, parsimony, and concord with accepted facts—the resurrection excels its rivals. The philosophical door that Hume seemed to slam shut stands open after all, and the evidence waiting on the threshold is exactly the kind that, in every other corner of our intellectual life, warrants belief. In other words, if Part I is right, then God exists, and the philosophical objection to miracles collapses.

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Subsequent Reflections

Part A – Knocking Down the Problem of Evil[197]

Perhaps the most formidable intellectual challenge to belief in God is what has long been called the problem of evil. While Christianity can be established on two independent foundations—the reality of some transcendent Mind (as demonstrated by the MAB in Part I) and the resurrection of Christ (as argued by the Minimal Facts approach in Part II)—without venturing into this further issue, it nonetheless seems

[197] For the sake of this section (Part A) and the following section (Part B), the author will proceed by treating Perfect Being Theism (PBT)—understood as the view that the ultimate reality is specifically a maximally great being, omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good—as the central live and defensible option. The author does not, however, necessarily endorse PBT as the *best*—or even the uniquely plausible—framework. For academic purposes, the framework operative in this work is instead Metaphysical Theism (MT): the claim that there exists a necessary, concrete reality that is conscious and intelligent. Crucially, MT is strictly agnostic regarding the moral character (if such a category can properly be applied) and intentions of this reality. It neither affirms that this being is good in any robustly human sense, nor that it is morally perfect; it simply remains noncommittal on such predicates. The claim, then, is *not* that MT is the uniquely best framework, nor that rival frameworks are thereby refuted, but rather that MT is the minimal and operative background assumption employed throughout this book. On this view, the case for the Resurrection does not depend on PBT, but only on the existence of a transcendent intelligent agent capable of causal action in the world—sufficient to satisfy the criterion of plausibility understood in terms of coherence with a background of true beliefs. MT, in this sense, is fully adequate to ground plausibility; that criterion neither requires nor entails that such a being would *predict*, or be antecedently expected to bring about, the Resurrection on evidential grounds. Thus, while the Problem of Evil (in all its variants), the Problem of Animal Suffering, the Problem of Divine Hiddenness, the Problem of Religious Diversity or Confusion, and tensions surrounding certain biblical narratives (e.g., the Canaanite accounts), may constitute a formidable—indeed, for some, even knockdown—objection to PBT, MT remains entirely untouched. Even if these arguments were wholly granted to succeed in the strongest conceivable sense, they would at most undermine Perfect Being Theism, not Metaphysical Theism, which remains robustly intact independently of moral or axiological considerations.

essential to engage it for anyone pursuing a comprehensive and mature worldview. Both arguments stand on their own as sound, but the question should still be faced.

The so-called "problem of evil" (along with most atheistic objections) does *not*, despite widespread assumption, logically challenge the *existence* of God. To say that moral outrage at atrocities disproves God's existence would be as nonsensical as claiming that condemning Hitler's crimes undermines Hitler's existence. Rather, the problem of evil addresses questions about God's *moral character and purposes*. Here, "God" is defined in the narrower sense—as the necessary, conscious, concrete being established by the MAB—not yet in the fuller, classical theistic sense (i.e., an omnibenevolent, absolutely perfect being). Even if we granted that the various formulations of the Problem of Evil and the Problem of Divine Hiddenness were fully decisive and unanswerable, their force would be limited in scope. At most, they would undermine Perfect Being Theism (PBT), not the broader claim that there exists a necessary, concrete, conscious or intelligent reality—what we might call Metaphysical Theism (MT). Nor would such arguments automatically jeopardize the historicity of the Resurrection, since both the minimal facts approach and inference-to-the-best-explanation frameworks do not depend on PBT as a necessary premise.

Thus, even while remaining agnostic about God's moral character or intentions, we can rationally affirm *both* that God exists (since the modal proof remains constant) and that God raised Jesus from the dead (since the historical bedrock and IBE criteria remain unchanged). But many would say that we cannot remain at this level indefinitely. Our inquiry must go beyond bare existence and identity; we rightly long to know what God is *like*—His moral character and His intentions—not merely that He *is.* The difficulty lies in this: if there truly exists a God who is *both* all-powerful and wholly *good*, it seems puzzling—even extremely implausible—that the world should contain such immense amounts of pain and suffering.

The scale of human misery is beyond calculation. Some of this suffering stems from humanity's cruelty to itself—acts of injustice, violence, and oppression. Yet what often appears even harder to reconcile with divine goodness and power are the tragedies that occur apart from human agency. These include natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, or hurricanes; diseases like smallpox, polio, cancer, or leukemia; congenital conditions such as muscular dystrophy

or cerebral palsy; and devastating accidents like drowning, crushing injuries, or severe burns. In many cases, natural and moral evils are interwoven, as when famine in East Africa has been exacerbated not by a lack of food, but by authoritarian regimes deliberately blocking relief supplies to weaken their opponents. When one considers the breadth and depth of suffering—whether caused by human malice or natural processes—the morality of an all-powerful God seems called into question.

Over roughly the last twenty-five years, philosophers have devoted sustained attention to this problem, and their efforts have brought about genuine progress in clarifying and addressing it. A useful starting point is to distinguish between two different aspects of the issue: the intellectual and the emotional. The intellectual problem concerns whether it is possible to give a rational account of how God and evil could coexist. The emotional problem, by contrast, deals with how to comfort those who are actually suffering and how to respond to the visceral sense of offense at a God who allows such pain. The intellectual dimension falls properly within the work of philosophers, while the emotional dimension belongs more to the realm of pastoral care and counseling. Confusing the two can be unhelpful: philosophical responses to the intellectual problem may feel cold or insensitive to someone in the midst of hardship, while pastoral responses to the emotional problem may seem inadequate as a rational explanation when the question is considered abstractly. With that distinction in place, it is best to begin by examining the intellectual side of the problem of evil.

Further clarification is useful at this stage. Philosophers today recognize that the intellectual problem of evil comes in several distinct forms, often labeled “deductive,” “inductive,” “logical,” “probabilistic,” or “evidential.” While there is no single, universally agreed-upon taxonomy, it is nonetheless helpful to focus on two broad ways of framing the issue: as an **internal** problem or as an **external** problem.

The internal version arises when the challenge is posed using assumptions or commitments that a Christian theist either does, or reasonably should, accept as part of their faith. In this case, the charge is that the Christian worldview is inconsistent with itself—that its own claims generate a contradiction. By contrast, the external version appeals to premises that do not flow directly from Christian belief but are nonetheless regarded as broadly credible or true. Here the intent is

not to show incoherence within Christianity but rather to argue that, given the existence of evil, the Christian account of reality is unlikely or implausible.

The internal problem of evil itself divides into two main forms: a **logical** version and a **probabilistic** version. In the logical form, the critic claims that the existence of both God and evil is outright impossible. Just as there cannot be a possible world in which an irresistible force meets an immovable object, so too there cannot be one in which an all-powerful, perfectly good God coexists with evil. Since Christianity, unlike some other traditions such as strands of Hindu thought, affirms both the reality of evil and the reality of such a God, the argument concludes that the position collapses into contradiction. Evil undeniably exists—therefore, God does not.

The probabilistic form softens the claim. Here, the objector concedes that it is not strictly impossible for God and evil to exist together. Instead, the charge is that it is highly unlikely. The Christian believer, then, is saddled with two commitments—God's existence and the reality of evil—that together appear improbable.

The logical version rests on the alleged incompatibility of two claims:

1. An omnipotent, wholly good God exists.
2. Evil exists.

For centuries this was the standard framing of the issue, stretching back at least to Epicurus, and still regarded by David Hume as unresolved in his own day. Even into the mid-twentieth century, philosophers such as J. L. Mackie advanced the argument in this form.

It was Alvin Plantinga's work that decisively reshaped the discussion. Plantinga distinguished between a *theodicy* and a *defense*. A theodicy offers a positive account of why God permits the evils that exist; a defense, by contrast, aims only to show that the atheist has not succeeded in demonstrating a contradiction between God and evil. The latter strategy does not explain suffering; it merely blocks the inference that evil and God are logically incompatible.

Plantinga argued that the logical version of the problem of evil places an unsustainable burden of proof on the skeptic. On the face of it,

statements (1) and (2) are not contradictory. For them to be implicitly inconsistent, further hidden premises are required—most commonly:

3. If God is omnipotent, he can create any world he chooses.
4. If God is omnibenevolent, he would prefer a world without evil to one with evil.

The skeptic reasons as follows: since God is all-powerful, he could have created a world of free creatures who always choose rightly. Such a world, devoid of moral evil, should be within God's power. Likewise, he could have ensured a world without natural disasters, disease, or suffering. Such a flawless world, it is argued, would have been preferable, and a truly good God would certainly have chosen it. Hume's famous challenge presses the point: if God is willing but not able, he is weak; if able but not willing, he is malicious; if both able and willing, whence then evil?

In order for the logical/deductive version of the Problem of Evil to succeed, both of the hidden premises must be *necessarily* true. But are they? Plantinga counters with his well-known *free will defense*. He maintains that if libertarian freedom is even possible, then assumption (3) is not necessarily true. It is logically impossible to *make* someone do something *freely*. That is as logically incoherent as a round square or a married bachelor. God's omnipotence does not extend to logical contradictions, and causing someone to freely choose a given action is precisely such a contradiction. Genuine freedom means choices are not predetermined, even by God. Accordingly, there can be indefinitely many possible worlds that God *cannot* actualize, since the relevant agents within them would not freely cooperate with his intentions—for example, a world in which eight billion individuals *freely* choose to love and serve him (something God cannot guarantee without determining their choices, in which case all freedom is undermined). Therefore, although there may be worlds that are logically possible, they may not be *feasible* for God to create—since in every such world containing free beings, at least some of them choose wrongly. If so, then every feasible world involving free creatures will contain evil. In that case, evil results not from God's failure, but from the free actions of creatures.

As for natural evil, Plantinga suggests that it could stem from the freedom of nonhuman agents such as demons. One may find this explanation improbable or fanciful, but improbability is irrelevant at

this stage. All that matters is that such a scenario is *possible*, which is sufficient to defeat the claim of logical incompatibility. Hence assumption (3) is undermined.

What of assumption (4), that a good God must prefer a world without evil to one with it? This too is not necessarily true. In human experience we often permit or impose temporary suffering to secure greater goods: parents allow hardships or discipline their children in order to promote maturity, responsibility, or growth. The skeptic might insist that an all-powerful being would not be so limited. He could bring about the greater good directly, without allowing any suffering. But clearly, given human freedom of the will, that may not be possible. Certain goods, for example, moral virtues, are only possible through the free cooperation of people. By analogy, God may permit pain for morally sufficient reasons—whether to strengthen individuals, to test them, or to achieve outcomes beyond our present grasp. In such cases, allowing evil does not negate God's goodness.

Thus, both hidden premises fail to hold as necessary truths. The logical argument that God and evil cannot coexist is therefore invalid, and the supposed contradiction dissolves.

Advocates of the logical problem of evil sometimes attempt a renewed line of attack. They may concede that God's existence is not logically incompatible with evil in the abstract, but insist that it is incompatible with the **extent and severity** of the evil we actually observe. The claim here is that while occasional instances of suffering might be reconcilable with God's goodness and power, the sheer volume and brutality of evil in the real world—innocents tortured and killed in horrific ways, for example—cannot be squared with such a God.

The underlying assumption of this argument is that God cannot possibly have morally sufficient reasons for permitting the kinds and quantity of evil that exist. But that assumption is far from self-evident. Consider first the sheer amount of evil. Despite the tragedies of life, many still find existence meaningful and worth living. Indeed, even in hardship people generally hope for improvement and cling to life. This suggests that the world, on balance, may contain far more good than evil. It is also possible that, given the constraints of creaturely freedom, every feasible world available to God that contained less evil would also have contained less good. In that case, the actual world might be the best "trade-off" between good and evil that God could actualize.

The same reasoning applies to the types of evil. God may allow even the most appalling atrocities for reasons tied to higher goods we cannot fully grasp. The objection that God could have created a world with fewer atrocities misses the point: if such a world would also have lacked certain overriding goods, then it may not have been feasible for God to actualize it.

At this stage, skeptics may protest that such scenarios sound highly improbable. But that confuses two distinct problems. The task of rebutting the *logical* problem of evil does not require offering a likely explanation, only a *possible* one. The challenge was to show that God and the world's evil cannot logically coexist; demonstrating that they *can* coexist—even under a merely possible scenario—undermines the objection. And no atheist has succeeded in proving that God could not, under any circumstances, have morally sufficient reasons for allowing the evils we see.

Plantinga presses this point further. Not only has the atheist failed to prove inconsistency, but we can in fact show consistency. A possible explanation is as follows:

5. God could not have created a world containing as much good as the actual world with any less evil (in both quantity and quality), and God has morally sufficient reasons for permitting the evil that exists.

Here "could not" is understood in terms of feasibility, not bare logical possibility. While there may be possible worlds with more good and less evil, such worlds may not be feasible for God, given the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom. If (5) is even possibly true, then the existence of God and the existence of evil are logically compatible.

One might reply that (5) is only *epistemically* possible—that we cannot rule it out, though it may not be metaphysically possible. Perhaps, in every possible world where God exists, the relevant truths about creaturely freedom would allow him to actualize a better world than ours. This counter-hypothesis, however, is exceedingly speculative, and in fact most philosophers—including many atheists—acknowledge that (5) is at least metaphysically possible.

Ultimately, the burden of proof lies with the atheist, since it is the atheist who claims that a contradiction exists between theism and evil.

That is a daunting burden, and one that has never been successfully carried. As a result, most contemporary philosophers—whether theists, atheists, or agnostics—now agree that the logical version of the problem of evil has been decisively answered.

When we shift from the logical to the **probabilistic problem of evil**, however, the challenge becomes more pressing. Even if it is possible, as argued earlier, that a good God and evil coexist, it still seems highly *implausible*. Explanations that attribute all natural evil to demonic activity, for instance, strike most as fanciful. And surely God could have reduced at least some of the world's suffering without thereby reducing the overall good. The sheer number of seemingly pointless or gratuitous evils makes it hard to see how God could have adequate reasons for allowing them. Thus, the objection concludes, while not impossible, God's existence is improbable given the realities of evil.

This line of argument is undeniably stronger than the logical version. Its conclusion is more modest—claiming improbability rather than impossibility—which makes it correspondingly easier to defend. How should the theist respond? Four considerations help frame the answer.

1. Probabilities are always relative to background information. The key question is: improbable relative to *what*? To illustrate, imagine Joe, a college student. Suppose 90 percent of college students drink beer. On that information alone, it seems highly probable that Joe drinks beer. But if we learn that Joe attends Biola University, where 90 percent of students *do not* drink beer, the probability shifts dramatically. The moral: probability judgments depend on the reference class or background knowledge employed.

Now apply this to the case of God. If we look only at the fact of evil, it is unsurprising that God's existence appears improbable relative to that narrow slice of evidence. It would indeed be an extraordinary achievement if theists could prove that, relative to the evidence of evil *alone*, God's existence is probable. But the Christian is under no obligation to meet that standard. Instead, he will insist that the full range of relevant evidence be considered: arguments from the origin and fine-tuning of the universe, the existence of objective moral values, the concept of a maximally great being, historical evidence for Jesus and the resurrection, reports of miracles, and personal religious experience. When evil is weighed alongside this broader evidential

base, the balance, the theist argues, tilts toward theism—or at least does not tip against it.

Indeed, a theist may even concede that, taken in isolation, the reality of evil makes God's existence improbable. But once the total body of evidence is taken into account, the scales may well favor belief in God.

2. Our epistemic limitations prevent confident probability judgments about God's reasons.

Whether God's existence appears improbable in light of evil depends crucially on how likely it is that God lacks morally sufficient reasons for allowing evil. And here we run into a fundamental problem: as finite, limited creatures, we are in no position to assess such probabilities with any confidence. Human beings are bounded by space and time, by restricted intelligence and insight, whereas God, as transcendent and sovereign, views history from beginning to end and orders events providentially so that his purposes are ultimately realized through the free decisions of creatures. To accomplish such purposes, God may need to permit certain evils along the way. What strikes us as pointless or gratuitous may, from God's broader vantage point, serve a necessary role within a much larger plan.

An analogy from chaos theory illustrates the point. Scientists studying complex systems such as weather have discovered that tiny inputs can produce enormous long-term effects—the proverbial butterfly flapping its wings in West Africa could contribute to the formation of a hurricane in the Atlantic. Yet no observer of the butterfly could predict such consequences. Likewise, the tragic murder of an innocent person or the death of a child from leukemia could set in motion ripple effects through history whose redemptive or morally sufficient justification would only become evident generations later, or even in another part of the world.

Our earlier discussion of divine middle knowledge highlighted that only an omniscient mind could weave together the incalculable contingencies of a world of free agents in order to achieve foreknown purposes. Consider the Allied victory on D-Day: countless factors and free decisions had to align for that outcome to occur. If coordinating a single event of that magnitude already involves innumerable variables, how much more complex would be God's governance of the whole of history? We simply cannot estimate what moral or natural evils might

be entailed in order for God to achieve his aims, or what goods might justify the permission of certain sufferings in our lives.

This appeal is not a cheap invocation of mystery but a sober acknowledgment of cognitive limitation. Interestingly, critics of utilitarianism make the same point: it is impossible for us to calculate with certainty which of our actions will maximize happiness or minimize suffering in the long run. Choices that appear disastrous in the short term may prove to have long-term benefits, while seemingly beneficial actions may sow the seeds of greater harm. If this is true on the human scale, how much more when contemplating divine providence over history as a whole? In light of our limitations, it is futile to claim with confidence that God probably has no morally sufficient reasons for permitting the evils we observe.

3. Christian doctrines raise the probability of God's coexistence with evil.
Another response is to note that Christian theism contains specific doctrines that, if true, would make the presence of evil less surprising. The objection assumes that if God exists, evil should be improbable. But if we include within our background knowledge the teachings of Christianity itself, the probability shifts. Formally, if God exists *together with* certain Christian doctrines, then the likelihood of evil is greater than it would be under bare theism:

Pr(Evil | God & Christian Doctrines) > Pr(Evil | God).

This is not question-begging, since the Christian is not taking "Evil exists" as a hypothesis. Rather, the Christian appeals to features of the faith—such as doctrines of the fall, human freedom, the role of suffering, or eschatological hope—that help explain why evil is not so improbable given God's existence. Since the problem is framed as an internal difficulty for Christians, it is entirely legitimate for the Christian to draw upon the resources of the Christian worldview in crafting a reply. From this vantage point, the probabilistic problem of evil is actually easier to answer within Christianity than within a minimalist theism that lacks these explanatory resources. Four doctrines, in particular, are especially relevant.

First, the ultimate purpose of life is not worldly happiness but the knowledge of God.
One of the reasons the problem of evil can feel so perplexing is that

people often assume God's chief aim must be to ensure human happiness in this life, as though his role were to provide a comfortable environment for his creatures. On the Christian view, however, this is mistaken. Human beings are not God's "pets," and happiness is not the final goal. Instead, the central purpose of life is to come to know God, a good that ultimately leads to true and everlasting fulfillment.

From this perspective, many forms of suffering that look pointless when measured against human comfort may, in fact, be significant in deepening trust, dependence, and knowledge of God—whether in the life of the sufferer or those around them. How that suffering functions will, of course, depend on the human response: one may react with bitterness and rejection of God, or with faith and endurance.

Theologian Martyn Lloyd-Jones once expressed this perspective clearly, insisting that history itself can only be properly understood in light of the kingdom of God. According to Lloyd-Jones, God has been at work from the beginning to establish his kingdom, calling people out of the world into it. Every event, however bewildering, must be judged by its bearing on that kingdom. Personal and global hardships alike, he argued, should prompt us not to doubt God's goodness but to ask: *What is God teaching me through this? What relevance does this event have to his eternal purposes?*

History bears this out. Time and again, moral and natural evils have become the soil for spiritual growth. For instance:

- **China**: During Mao's Cultural Revolution, an estimated 20 million perished, and Christians endured brutal persecution. Yet this very persecution purified and indigenized the Church. Since the late 1970s, the Church in China has experienced unprecedented growth, with tens of millions of believers by 1990. Mao Zedong, ironically, became an unwitting catalyst for one of history's greatest Christian revivals.
- **El Salvador**: A civil war, natural disasters, and economic collapse left more than 80% of the population in poverty. Amid suffering and bitterness, evangelical Christianity grew from 2.3% of the population in 1960 to about 20% by the late twentieth century.
- **Ethiopia**: Waves of famine, war, and persecution devastated the nation, claiming millions of lives. Yet out of this crucible,

> the Church grew rapidly—from less than 1% of the population in 1960 to an estimated 13% by 1990.[198]

Examples could be multiplied.[199] Human history is both a record of immense suffering and of the advance of God's kingdom. As missiologist Patrick Johnstone has observed, we are witnessing the largest global turning to God in history—growth that may be intimately connected with the presence of suffering.

Second, humanity lives in a state of rebellion against God. Another key doctrine is that human beings have turned away from God's rule and sought independence from him. Rather than worship and obey, we pursue our own way, resulting in alienation from God, moral guilt, and spiritual blindness. The evils we see in human society are therefore not surprising to Christians—they are the predictable outworking of human sinfulness.

Scripture teaches that God has "given humanity over" to the sin it has freely chosen (Romans 1:24, 26, 28). In this sense, God does not always intervene to restrain human wickedness but allows its consequences to unfold. This deepens human responsibility while also exposing our desperate need for forgiveness and moral transformation. Moreover, Christian teaching holds that rebellion is not limited to humankind alone. There exists a realm of spiritual beings in revolt against God—malevolent powers bent on undermining his purposes. In their influence over creation, Christians find part of the explanation for the extent and intensity of moral evil in the world. From this vantage point, the pervasiveness of evil is not unexpected but entirely consistent with a universe in rebellion against its Creator.

Third, God's purposes extend beyond this life into eternity. From the standpoint of Christian theism, this earthly life is not the whole story. It is only the narrow entryway to the vast expanse of eternity. God promises everlasting life to those who trust in Christ, and

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[198] Patrick Johnstone, Operation World (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), 164, 207–8, 214.

[199] For example, the 7.0 magnitude earthquake that devastated Haiti in 2010 has led to unprecedented revival in that island nation. Missionary Seth Barnes of Adventures in Missions reported, "'Revival' is too small a word for what we saw in Haiti … everywhere there were prayer meetings —groups as small as 20 or as large as 60,000…. The spiritual atmosphere of the country is completely different now. Voodoo priests by the hundreds have given their lives to Christ" (personal communication to Johnson Ferry Global Ministries staff).

it is within that eternal perspective that present suffering must be understood. When God permits his children to endure terrible pain in this life, it is always under the promise of a heavenly reward that surpasses all comprehension.

The apostle Paul exemplifies this outlook. His life was marked by relentless hardship—both moral and natural evil—including "afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger" (2 Cor 6:4–5). Yet he could still write with conviction:

"So we do not lose heart. … For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." (2 Cor 4:16–18, RSV)

Paul was not trivializing suffering—he knew it firsthand. Rather, he placed it against the backdrop of eternity. Compared to the infinite span of everlasting joy, the worst of human sufferings shrink to a vanishing point. For that reason he could describe them as "slight" and "momentary." It may even be that certain evils yield no discernible earthly good at all; yet God may permit them so that those who endure in faith will receive overwhelming reward in the life to come.

Fourth, the knowledge of God is an incomparable good.
Paul's imagery also illustrates this final point. He envisions a set of scales: on one side, the cumulative weight of earthly suffering; on the other, the glory of knowing God. The balance is not even close. To know God—the fountain of infinite goodness and love—is a good so great that it dwarfs every evil. This relationship with God is the true fulfillment of human existence, and no suffering, however dreadful, can outweigh it. Thus, even the one who suffers deeply can still truthfully affirm, "God has been good to me," simply because he knows God.

These four doctrines, taken together, significantly increase the probability that God and evil coexist. They help to neutralize the force of the probabilistic objection by situating suffering within the larger framework of Christian belief. Even if, when considered in isolation, evil makes God's existence seem improbable, that does not settle the matter. Positive evidence for God—philosophical arguments, historical

claims, religious experience—must also be weighed. In addition, we are not in a good epistemic position to declare that God could not have sufficient reasons for allowing evil. And finally, Christian doctrines themselves provide a framework in which the coexistence of God and evil is not surprising.

For these reasons, the probabilistic problem of evil, while formidable, falls short of showing that belief in God is irrational or improbable.

If the problem of evil falters as an internal challenge to Christian theism, does it nonetheless resurface as an **external** problem? This has been the focus of much recent debate among philosophers. The internal versions we examined sought to show that two Christian beliefs—that God exists and that evil exists—are either inconsistent or improbable when taken together. Most contemporary non-theists have now moved away from that approach. Instead, they contend that the existence of *apparently pointless* or *unnecessary* evils provides evidence against the existence of God. In this formulation, the conflict is said to be between the following two claims:

6. An omnipotent, omnibenevolent God exists.
7. Gratuitous evil exists.

The reason this constitutes an external problem is that Christians are not committed to affirming (7). Their worldview requires belief in the reality of evil, but not in the existence of evil that is *truly gratuitous*—evil without any sufficient justification. Thus the external argument takes the following form:

8. If God exists, gratuitous evil does not exist.
9. Gratuitous evil exists.
10. Therefore, God does not exist.

The entire debate turns on the warrant for premise (9). A theist might readily concede that much of the evil we see *appears* gratuitous. But to move from *appearance* to *reality* is a major step. As we have already seen in discussing the probabilistic problem of evil, our limited cognitive position makes such probability judgments extremely uncertain. Our inability to identify a morally sufficient reason for a given evil is scant evidence that no such reason exists. A God endowed with omniscience—and, in particular, with middle knowledge of

counterfactuals—could well have reasons hidden from our finite perspective.

Here the broader evidential context once again comes into play. The crucial question, ironically, is not whether gratuitous evil exists, but whether God exists. For if God exists (as defined by the Perfect Being Model), then by definition gratuitous evil does not. Thus, the theist is equally entitled to construct the following argument:

11. If God exists, gratuitous evil does not exist.
12. God exists.
13. Therefore, gratuitous evil does not exist.

In this way, the same conditional premise (11) can serve as the basis for diametrically opposed conclusions. The atheist employs it in a *modus tollens* argument; the theist in a *modus ponens*. The dispute reduces to which premise—(9) or (12)—enjoys greater warrant.

As philosopher Daniel Howard-Snyder has observed, the problem of evil is only a "problem" for the theist who accepts its premises and inferences but has weak grounds for theism itself.[200] For the theist whose belief in God rests on stronger evidence, the supposed problem of evil does not succeed in overturning that foundation.

The same considerations apply to other versions of the external problem of evil that have been developed in contemporary philosophy. For example, Paul Draper has argued that naturalism is more probable than theism given the evolution of biological organisms and the distribution of pleasure and pain in the world. His case depends on three key probability assumptions, each of which is questionable.

First, Draper assumes that naturalism and theism are equally probable relative to our background knowledge ($Pr(N) = Pr(T)$). Yet, as we saw in earlier discussions of the cosmological and teleological arguments, this is not at all obvious. Second, Draper contends that the distribution of pleasure and pain is more likely on naturalism plus evolution than on theism plus evolution ($Pr(P\&E \mid N) > Pr(P\&E \mid T)$). But again, our epistemic limitations render such probability judgments highly suspect. Third, Draper argues that evolution is more probable given naturalism

[200] Daniel Howard-Snyder, introduction to *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), xi.

than given theism ($Pr(E \mid N) > Pr(E \mid T)$), since on naturalism evolution is the only mechanism available, while theism allows alternatives. But what Draper's reasoning actually supports is a different claim: that evolution is more probable relative to naturalism *and the existence of biological organisms* than relative to theism *and the existence of biological organisms* ($Pr(E \mid N \& B) > Pr(E \mid T \& B)$). Yet, as our earlier teleological considerations showed, the existence of life itself is staggeringly improbable on naturalism alone. Indeed, if naturalism were true, the expectation should be of a lifeless universe. By contrast, theism provides a foundation for expecting biological life, and hence evolution. Without his three critical probability assumptions, Draper's evidential case from evil collapses.

Moreover, even premise (8)—that if God exists, then gratuitous evil does not exist—is not as secure as it may seem. Some theists have argued that while God could eliminate particular evils without diminishing overall goodness, a world entirely free of gratuitous evils might not be as good overall. Once divine middle knowledge is factored in, it may be that only in worlds containing what appear to us as gratuitous evils do the relevant counterfactuals of creaturely freedom hold true, thereby enabling God to bring the optimal number of persons freely into relationship with himself. In such a case, the evils are not gratuitous after all, but serve the greater good of salvation. But this only underscores how difficult it is for the atheist to prove that any evil is truly gratuitous. For how could one, from a finite standpoint, judge what does or does not contribute to God's redemptive purposes across history?

To grasp the sheer scale of our epistemic limitations, it is illuminating to view the problem through the lens of **topology and combinatorics**. Imagine a simplified, closed system: a small town consisting of exactly 5,000 people. Topologically, we can model this town as a dynamic network graph. Each individual represents a node, and their relationships, interactions, and daily encounters form the connecting edges. This network is highly dense and constantly shifting; a single interaction can forge a new edge, break an old one, or alter the "weight" of an existing connection.

Now, introduce the combinatorial explosion of human free will. Suppose that each of these 5,000 individuals makes just three morally or circumstantially significant free choices a day. Because these individuals are interconnected, a choice made by one node immediately alters the environmental conditions—and the subsequent array of

available choices—for neighboring nodes. Within a single week, the number of possible interacting causal chains and branching timelines in this small town does not merely multiply; it scales exponentially. Over a year, the combinatorial state-space of possible historical outcomes for this town becomes so vast that it exceeds the computational capacity of any human supercomputer.

To quantify this combinatorial explosion mathematically, let N represent the number of interacting nodes (5,000 people), and let c represent the number of daily binary choices per person (3 choices, such as choosing to act or not to act). In just a single day, the network undergoes a total of $N \times c = 15{,}000$ discrete decision events. Because the outcome of each choice bifurcates the timeline of the town, the number of possible historical states S generated in just twenty-four hours can be expressed as:

$$S = 2^{N \times c} = 2^{15{,}000}$$

To grasp the magnitude of this figure, $2^{15{,}000}$ is approximately $10^{4{,}515}$. For context, the estimated number of atoms in the entire observable universe is only about 10^{80}. Over the course of a single year ($t = 365$ days), the equation for the branching timelines scales to $S = 2^{N \times c \times t}$, yielding $2^{5{,}475{,}000}$, or roughly $10^{1{,}648{,}000}$ possible interconnected historical trajectories. And this staggering calculation conservatively assumes that human choices are merely binary; introducing multi-variable decisions pushes the state-space into factorial growth ($n!$) that dwarfs even these exponential functions.

Now consider the constraints upon even an omnipotent Creator. As established earlier, it is logically impossible for an external agent to *force* a creature to freely choose a specific action. Therefore, God cannot simply dictate the optimal outcomes. Instead, He must work *through* the shifting circumstances and free choices of His creatures. To achieve a specific redemptive goal—such as maximizing the number of people who freely choose to enter into an eternal relationship with Him—God must perfectly navigate this staggering combinatorial labyrinth of counterfactuals.

In this hyper-complex topological network, an instance of suffering is never an isolated, self-contained node. It is an event that sends immediate shockwaves through the network, permanently altering the topology of the town. A tragic accident might shift the emotional state

of fifty surrounding nodes, which in turn alters the thousands of free choices those nodes will make over the next decade. These branching ripple effects cascade outward across generations. An event that appears entirely pointless and tragic in year one might be the exact, necessary antecedent that prevents a catastrophic moral collapse in year ten, or serves as the precise catalyst that leads a family to freely embrace salvation in year fifty.

To be charitable, we must concede a crucial point: the theist is in no better position to map this network than the atheist. When confronted with a specific tragedy, the theist cannot definitively trace the topological ripples and assert, "Here is the exact, specific reason God allowed this evil to occur." We are utterly blind to the vastness of the combinatorial tree. The theist must humbly admit ignorance regarding the precise mechanics of divine providence in any given instance.

However, this epistemic stalemate is fatal only to the *skeptic's* argument. The external, probabilistic Problem of Evil requires the skeptic to shoulder a massive burden of proof: they must confidently assert that a specific instance of suffering is genuinely *gratuitous*—meaning that across the infinite branching timelines, through all topological ripples, and across the span of all time and space, this event serves absolutely no redemptive purpose or greater good whatsoever.

To make such a claim is to assume a posture of omniscience. If a finite human mind cannot compute the ripple effects of a single tragedy in a town of 5,000 people over a single decade, it is fundamentally irrational to claim that one can accurately judge the ultimate historical and eternal utility of an event within a global network of billions of people across millennia. The sheer mathematical complexity of free will and historical contingency ensures that we are simply not in an epistemic position to ever declare an evil definitively gratuitous. Thus, the external Problem of Evil collapses not because we can perfectly explain every tragedy, but because the skeptic's premise requires a vantage point that no human being could ever possibly possess.[201]

A final, decisive point can also be made: the very existence of evil provides evidence *for* God's existence. As argued in the axiological

[201] Of course, the analysis presented here leaves open questions about the Problem of Animal Suffering, which is a distinct issue. Since space here is limited, the reader is invited to engage with Gavin Ortlund's response, which can be found here: https://youtu.be/wxUu4ncP-JM?si=tA_Y2Z-sYfAeq_Y4.

case for theism, it is plausible that objective moral values cannot exist without God. If so, then evil—understood as the objective reality of certain acts or states being wrong—entails the reality of objective values, which in turn entails God's existence. The reasoning can be put formally:

14. If God does not exist, objective moral values do not exist.
15. Evil exists.
16. Therefore, objective moral values exist. (from 15, by definition of *evil*)
17. Therefore, God exists. (from 14 and 16)

The atheist himself, in appealing to the problem of evil, implicitly affirms the reality of objective moral values by calling certain evils *truly evil*. But this affirmation requires a transcendent foundation, which theism uniquely provides.

Consider how this reasoning applies to the prominent atheist Alex O'Connor. O'Connor is an explicit moral anti-realist: since he denies the existence of God, he also denies the existence of any *objective* moral values or duties. In that sense, he would readily affirm the following premise:

Premise (1): If God does not exist, then objective moral values and duties do not exist.

Yet, O'Connor simultaneously champions the **external Problem of Evil**, arguing that the "existence of gratuitous evil" renders belief in God irrational.[202] In so doing, he implicitly accepts:

Premise (2): Evil exists.

However, these two commitments, when combined, generate an unavoidable tension. If Premise (1) is true and O'Connor denies God's existence, then he must also deny the existence of any objective moral realities—including "evil." Yet by affirming Premise (2), he asserts that some states of affairs are *objectively evil*. This yields a logical

[202] Though, in truth, such an argument, even if assumed to be absolutely successful (which is quite dubious, as we've seen), would at most challenge certain formulations of *Perfect Being Theism*, not the more neutral conception of a necessary Mind that we defended earlier.

inconsistency: he cannot coherently maintain both that *evil exists* and that *no objective moral standard exists*.

The only consistent escape would be to reject Premise (2)—to deny that evil exists at all. But in that case, the **Problem of Evil** evaporates completely. After all, if evil does not exist, there is no "problem" left to explain.

Nor does substituting the term **"suffering"** solve the dilemma. If suffering is not objectively evil, then it is merely a neutral occurrence—no more morally significant than a man peacefully walking down the street—and cannot count as evidence against divine goodness or justice. On O'Connor's own view, in fact, the very notions of "injustice" and "wrongness" are illusory, so no moral accusation against God could ever stand. At that point, O'Connor might have to retreat from the external to the *internal* problem of evil, but even there, as we've seen, robust responses await him.

Finally, it is implausible to ground objective morality wholly apart from God. On a naturalistic worldview, the moral instincts of *Homo sapiens* are merely contingent by-products of evolution—adaptive for survival, perhaps, but devoid of any genuine objectivity. Thus, if one affirms both Premise (1) and Premise (2), theism follows by logical necessity. And if one denies Premise (2), the problem of evil dissolves.

Quite simply, there is no escape. Thus, rather than undermining belief in God, the very reality of evil confirms it.

"But wait!" someone like Alex O'Connor might interject. *If* God is not merely existent but good—and if he desires a loving, reciprocal relationship with human beings—then why does he remain so *hidden*? O'Connor insists that he has sincerely exerted himself to believe in God, yet God has not revealed himself in any personal or unmistakable way. This alleged absence of divine self-disclosure, he argues, is far more probable on atheism than on theism. If God genuinely wants relationship, then his failure to reach out to someone in O'Connor's epistemic position must, O'Connor reasons, serve as powerful evidence of God's nonexistence. For if O'Connor exemplifies a case of *non-resistant nonbelief*, how could that possibly be squared with the reality of a loving deity?

But not so fast. To begin with, as we have already seen, the argument from divine hiddenness (like the Problem of Evil or religious pluralism) even in its strongest possible form touches only God's *moral character* or *intentions*, not his *existence*. If even a single argument—say, the Modal Argument from Beginnings (MAB)—is sound, then God exists. Full stop. Even if the cosmos remained perpetually silent. Even if God never spoke, never manifested himself, never provided any experiential or testimonial evidence whatsoever, the truth of MAB would still secure—indeed, if correct, *necessarily* secure—the existence of God. At most, the hiddenness objection could motivate *misotheism*, the claim that God exists but is not morally admirable, rather than atheism. In that sense, the objection does not ultimately support atheism; it merely challenges a particular *construal* of God, such as classical or Perfect Being Theism.

But does the hiddenness objection even succeed on its own terms? Blaise Pascal famously remarked that God has provided enough evidence to satisfy those who genuinely *seek* him with an open mind and open heart, while also providing enough obscurity that those who do not wish to seek him will not be compelled. If a person is *not seeking God at all*, then it is unclear why God must be obligated to override their dispositions, preferences, or indifference by dramatic self-revelation. And if, like O'Connor, one has already surveyed the arguments of Natural Theology in depth, yet finds them so *utterly* implausible that one judges rational belief to be *absolutely impossible*, then the unbelief in question is no longer plausibly described as *non-resistant*. The rational weight of MAB alone, when understood and defended properly, is sufficient to demonstrate that point.

But one might still worry that—even if arguments from hiddenness cannot overturn a minimalist theism—they nevertheless undermine the *Christian* God in particular. Yet this does not follow. To identify the Christian God, one need only establish a single historical claim: that Jesus rose bodily from the dead. *Perfect Being* Theism is not a prerequisite for that conclusion. The *minimal facts* surrounding the resurrection are broadly affirmed across the scholarly spectrum, including by many agnostic and atheist historians; and once those facts are in place, the standard criteria of *Inference to the Best Explanation* consistently favor the Resurrection Hypothesis, as we have already seen.

Consequently, Divine Hiddenness may prompt questions about the Christian God's moral character or purposes, but those are distinct from

the evidential question of whether the Christian revelation objectively occurred. Moreover, if the Resurrection happened, then God has not remained silent; He has spoken the loudest word possible in history. And if God has, in fact, acted decisively in Christ, then he is not nearly as hidden as the objection supposes. Indeed, the very fact that you are reading this book and wrestling with these questions is itself a sign that the divine presence is anything but absent.
In light of these considerations, the intellectual problem of evil—whether framed in internal or external terms—fails as a decisive objection to God's existence. Logical formulations have been decisively answered, probabilistic arguments falter under scrutiny, and appeals to gratuitous evil collapse once the full scope of evidence and the resources of Christian theism are brought to bear. Indeed, the existence of evil, far from disproving God, may itself serve as part of the evidence that God is real.

Of course, when we say the problem of evil has been "solved," we mean that it has been *philosophically resolved*. Such reasoning, however, often brings little comfort to someone in the grip of raw, personal suffering. This introduces us to the second dimension of the issue: the **emotional problem of evil**.

For many, the difficulty is not intellectual but visceral. They are wounded, angry, or bitter toward a God who would allow such pain—whether their own or that of others. Philosophical arguments are of no interest; what they feel is a deep refusal to trust or acknowledge a God who permits suffering. Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* illustrates this vividly. Ivan Karamazov never refutes Christian responses to evil; he simply rejects the God they defend. "I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation, even if I am wrong," he declares. His atheism is not one of refutation but of rejection.

What, then, can be said—or better, *done*—for those struggling under the emotional weight of evil? Often the most important thing is not a set of words but the presence of a compassionate friend: someone who listens, weeps, and bears the burden with them. Still, there are times when counsel is needed, and we ourselves may confront this problem personally. Does Christian theism have the resources to address it?

The answer is yes. Christianity proclaims not a detached deity or impersonal force, but a loving Father who enters into the suffering of his creation. Alvin Plantinga puts it powerfully:

"As the Christian sees things, God does not stand idly by, coolly observing the suffering of his creatures. He enters into and shares our suffering. He endures the anguish of seeing his son, the second person of the Trinity, consigned to the bitterly cruel and shameful death of the cross. Some theologians claim that God cannot suffer. I believe they are wrong. God's capacity for suffering, I believe, is proportional to his greatness; it exceeds our capacity for suffering in the same measure as his capacity for knowledge exceeds ours. Christ was prepared to endure the agonies of hell itself; and God, the Lord of the universe, was prepared to endure the suffering consequent upon his son's humiliation and death. He was prepared to accept this suffering in order to overcome sin, and death, and the evils that afflict our world, and to confer on us a life more glorious than we can imagine. So we don't know why God permits evil; we do know, however, that he was prepared to suffer on our behalf, to accept suffering of which we can form no conception."[203]

At the center of the Christian faith stands the cross. Jesus, though innocent, embraced unimaginable suffering—not for his own sake but for ours. He bore the weight of sin and its consequences out of sheer love. To recognize this is to see evil from a different angle: the problem is no longer *God's* evil but *ours*. The pressing question becomes not how God can justify himself to us, but how we, guilty and broken, can be justified before him.

When God allows us to endure suffering that feels unjust or meaningless, reflection on the cross can give us strength to endure. We are reminded that God himself has walked the path of suffering before us and for us. Thus, paradoxically, while evil may be the most formidable objection to God's existence, God himself is the only ultimate answer to it. Without him, the world is a place of unredeemed anguish; with him, suffering is met with redemption, hope, and the promise of eternal joy in fellowship with him.

[203] Alvin Plantinga, "Self-Profile," in *Alvin Plantinga*, ed. James E. Tomberlin and Peter van Inwagen, Profiles 5 (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985), 36.

Part B – Addressing Religious Diversity

In contemporary Western culture, one often encounters a striking attitude toward religion. Many people are comfortable affirming that God exists, yet in our pluralistic context it is considered politically incorrect to claim that God has *uniquely* revealed himself in Jesus. Nevertheless, this is precisely what the New Testament asserts. Paul, for example, reminds his Gentile converts of their former state: *"*Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and *without God* in the world*"* (Eph. 2:12, ESV).

The opening chapters of Romans develop this theme, emphasizing that humanity as a whole shares this predicament. Paul insists that God's power and divine nature are clearly displayed through creation, leaving people without excuse (1:20). Moreover, God has inscribed his moral law on the human conscience, holding all morally accountable (2:15). Although eternal life is offered to those who respond appropriately to this general revelation (2:7), the sobering reality is that people consistently suppress the truth, ignore their Creator, and break his moral law (1:21–32). His conclusion is stark: all people are under the dominion of sin (3:9–12).

Worse, Paul says that nor can anyone save themselves by righteous living (3:19–20). Yet God has provided a *remedy*: through the atoning death of Jesus Christ, the demands of divine justice have been satisfied, opening the way for reconciliation (3:21–26). Salvation, Paul insists, is now freely available as a gift to be received through faith. The New Testament's logic is unmistakable: because sin is universal and Christ's death uniquely atones for it, salvation can be found in *no one else*. The apostles declared, *"There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved"* (Acts 4:12).

This claim—that salvation comes through Christ alone—was as scandalous in the polytheistic Roman Empire as it is in today's pluralistic West. Early Christians were persecuted, tortured, and even executed for refusing to adopt a pluralistic stance and honor the Roman gods. With time, however, Christianity grew to dominate the empire, and the scandal diminished. By the medieval period, thinkers like Augustine and Aquinas regarded the universality of the Church as one

of its marks. For them, it seemed unthinkable that such a vast and enduring institution could be built upon falsehood.

The unraveling of this exclusive doctrine began with the so-called "Expansion of Europe," the age of exploration between roughly 1450 and 1750. Through the voyages of Marco Polo, Columbus, Magellan, and others, Europeans discovered entire civilizations that had never heard of Christianity. This realization had two profound effects. First, it relativized religious belief. Christianity was no longer seen as a universal faith but as one tradition largely confined to Western Europe—a small corner of the world. Each culture appeared to possess its own religion suited to its needs, casting doubt on any single faith's claim to universality. Second, Christianity's assertion of being the only path to salvation began to appear harsh and unjust. Enlightenment figures like Voltaire ridiculed the idea that millions in places like China should be damned for failing to believe in a Christ they had never encountered.

Today, global immigration and instantaneous communication have made humanity's religious diversity more visible than ever. As the world has become a "global village," religious pluralism—the conviction that there are many valid paths to God—has reemerged as the reigning assumption of our culture.

But what exactly is the difficulty raised by humanity's religious diversity—and for whom is it really a problem? In the literature, the pressure is almost always placed on those who affirm that Christ is the only way to God. Let us call this conviction **Christian particularism**. The existence of many religions is often taken to imply that some form of pluralism must be true, and the debate quickly shifts to which version of pluralism is most defensible. But why assume that Christian particularism cannot withstand the challenge of religious diversity? What, precisely, is supposed to be the problem?

When one examines the arguments offered on behalf of pluralism, many of them turn out to be classic examples of faulty reasoning. A common claim, for instance, is that religious particularism is arrogant or even immoral, since it requires one to view those who disagree as mistaken. But this is simply a textbook case of the **ad hominem fallacy**—attempting to discredit a view by attacking the character of its proponents. Whether particularists are arrogant or immoral is irrelevant

to the truth of their position. Even if every Christian particularist were guilty of such flaws, that would not make the view false.

Moreover, there is no reason to think that arrogance or immorality necessarily accompany particularism. Imagine someone who has sincerely sought the truth about ultimate reality, has become convinced that Christianity is true, and has embraced faith as an undeserved gift of grace. Is such a person arrogant and immoral simply for believing what they are persuaded is true? What alternative could they take but to believe the truth as they see it?

Even more telling, this charge is self-defeating. For the pluralist also maintains that his perspective is correct and that all particularistic religions are mistaken. By the same reasoning, then, pluralism itself would be guilty of arrogance and immorality. The objection therefore proves too much, cutting equally against the very position it was meant to defend.

Another common objection is that Christian particularism cannot be correct because religious belief is culturally conditioned. The reasoning goes like this: if you had been born in Pakistan, you would most likely have been a Muslim; therefore, your present Christian convictions are either false or unjustified.

But once again, this line of argument commits a classic error—namely, the **genetic fallacy**. This fallacy attempts to invalidate a belief by pointing to the way it originated. Yet the truth of a belief is independent of how one came to hold it. That your convictions are influenced by time and place says nothing about whether they are true. Consider: if you had been born in ancient Greece, you probably would have believed that the sun revolves around the earth. Does that mean your current belief that the earth revolves around the sun is false or unjustified? Clearly not.

And just as before, the pluralist's objection turns back on himself. For had the pluralist been born in Pakistan, he would most likely have been a religious particularist rather than a pluralist. By his own reasoning, then, his commitment to pluralism is nothing more than a product of his late–twentieth-century Western upbringing, and is therefore itself false or unjustified.

So, many of the popular objections raised against Christian particularism turn out to be fairly weak. But we must not think that, because pluralists often appeal to fallacious reasoning, pluralism itself poses no serious challenge. By clearing away these superficial arguments, we can finally get to the real issue that lies beneath the surface.

At its core, the real problem concerns the destiny of those outside one's particular religious tradition. Christian particularism insists that Christ is the only doorway to eternal life—a claim that pluralists find morally intolerable. Few lives illustrate this struggle better than that of John Hick. Hick began his career as a relatively conservative Christian theologian, even publishing a book titled *Christianity at the Centre*. But as his study of world religions deepened and he came to know many of their devout and virtuous adherents, he found it increasingly difficult to believe that such people were excluded from salvation. The implications were clear: if salvation came solely through Christ's incarnation and atoning death, then these individuals were lost. To resolve this tension, Hick concluded that Jesus could no longer remain at the center.

But so long as the doctrines of incarnation and atonement were upheld, Christ could not be pushed to the margins. Hick therefore took the radical step of editing *The Myth of God Incarnate*, arguing that these defining Christian doctrines are not literal truths but symbolic myths. In his own words:

"The problem which has come to the surface in the encounter of Christianity with the other world religions is this: If Jesus was literally God incarnate, and if it is by his death alone that men can be saved, and by their response to him alone that they can appropriate that salvation, then the only doorway to eternal life is Christian faith. It would follow from this that the large majority of the human race so far have not been saved. But is it credible that the loving God and Father of all men has decreed that only those born within one particular thread of human history shall be saved?"[204]

[204] John Hick, "Jesus and the World Religions," in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. John Hick (London: SCM, 1977), 179–80.

Here, then, is the central challenge raised by the reality of religious diversity: the fate of those who stand outside the Christian faith.

But what, exactly, is the problem supposed to be with holding that salvation comes only through Christ? Is the objection simply that a loving God would never send people to hell? That cannot be the whole story. Scripture affirms that God genuinely desires the salvation of all. *"The Lord is… not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance"* (2 Pet. 3:9, ESV). Similarly, Paul writes that God *"desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth"* (1 Tim. 2:4, NASB). Through the prophet Ezekiel, God declares:

"Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live? … For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God; so turn, and live.… Say to them, As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die?" (Ezek. 18:23, 32; 33:11).

Here God pleads with people to abandon their self-destructive path and receive life.

In that sense, it is not God who "sends" anyone to hell. His desire is that all be saved, and he actively draws people toward himself. But if someone freely and knowingly rejects Christ's sacrifice for sin, then God ultimately allows that decision to stand. He grants them what they have chosen. Their eternal destiny lies in their own hands: to live with God or apart from him. Those who are lost are self-condemned, separating themselves from the God who longs to save them. And Scripture portrays God as grieving over their loss.

A pluralist might respond by conceding that freedom entails some will reject God, but then press a different objection: is it just for God to condemn people to eternal punishment? After all, even terrible crimes—say, the atrocities of Nazi torturers—seem to merit only a finite penalty. If so, then hell should be finite as well. It might function as a kind of purgatory, lasting only as long as is proportionate to each person's wrongdoing, until all are eventually purified and welcomed

into heaven.[205] Ironically, on this view, the doctrine of eternal hell is incompatible not with God's love, but with his justice. Yet this objection falters in at least two ways.

First, it conflates *every sin* with *all sins together*. We might grant that each individual sin deserves only a finite punishment. But it does not follow that the cumulative weight of all sins also warrants only finite punishment. If a person commits sin endlessly, the guilt compounds without end. And in the afterlife, it's possible that some of those estranged from God may persist in rejecting him, continuing to sin and so continually accruing guilt. In that sense, hell becomes self-perpetuating: each sin has a finite consequence, but because sinning continues forever, so does punishment.

Second, why assume that each sin has only finite significance? Ordinary sins like lying, theft, or adultery might be finite in scope, but these are not ultimately what exclude someone from God. For Christ has already borne the penalty for such sins, and forgiveness is freely available to all who receive him. The decisive sin—the one that

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[205] Importantly, there are highly respected analytic Christian philosophers—such as Joshua Rasmussen—who affirm Christian universalism. In contemporary analytic theology, *universalism* is the doctrinal thesis that all human beings will ultimately be saved, understood as the final and irreversible reconciliation of every person to God. On this view, despite the reality of moral failure, sin, and post-mortem or eschatological judgment, divine redemptive action is ultimately successful in bringing all created persons into a right relationship with God. Universalism is often contrasted with *infernalism* (the view that some will experience everlasting separation from God or eternal punishment) and *annihilationism* (the view that some will ultimately cease to exist rather than be eternally punished).
Within philosophical theology, universalism is widely regarded as a logically coherent position, compatible with classical theistic commitments such as omnipotence, omniscience, and goodness. Moreover, some philosophers argue that it is not merely coherent but positively motivated by considerations about the nature of divine love, the asymmetry between finite human wrongdoing and infinite divine goodness, and the plausibility of moral and spiritual transformation under idealized conditions of post-mortem encounter with God. Others also appeal to worries about the proportionality of eternal punishment, as well as the hope that divine purposes in creation are not ultimately frustrated for any individual person.
For the purposes of the present work, the author remains neutral regarding the truth of universalism itself, neither endorsing nor rejecting it. However, the position is acknowledged as a serious live option within contemporary philosophical discourse, and the reader is invited to undertake a comparative assessment of universalism alongside its principal alternatives in order to evaluate their relative explanatory power, moral plausibility, and theological coherence.

separates eternally—is the refusal to accept Christ's atoning work. This rejection is of an entirely different order. It spurns God's provision for reconciliation, repudiates his grace, and amounts to a rejection of God himself. In light of who God is—the infinite source of truth and goodness—the rejection of him could plausibly be a sin of infinite gravity. Such a choice could, at least in principle, justly incur an infinite consequence. That said, of course, one must recognize that there are other viable accounts on the table (such as Rasmussen's; see previous footnote). Thus, the real difficulty with Christian particularism is not merely the doctrine of hell. The issue runs deeper.

Perhaps, then, the real problem is thought to be this: a loving God would not consign people to hell simply because they were uninformed or misinformed about Christ. After all, how could someone who has never heard of Jesus—or has only been presented with a distorted caricature of him—be expected to place saving faith in him?

But once again, this does not strike at the heart of the issue. For according to Scripture, God does not judge those who have never heard the gospel on the basis of whether they have consciously placed faith in Christ. Instead, he judges them in light of the revelation he has already given in nature and conscience.

Paul makes this clear in Romans 2:7: *"To those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life."* In other words, those who respond to God's general revelation with perseverance and sincerity—seeking forgiveness through the witness of conscience and casting themselves upon the mercy of the Creator revealed in nature—may indeed receive salvation. This is not to suggest that anyone can be saved apart from Christ. Rather, it is to say that the benefits of Christ's atoning death can be applied to individuals who lack conscious knowledge of him. We see parallels to this in the Old Testament. Figures such as Job and Melchizedek were not Jews and did not belong to the covenant people of Israel. Yet they clearly enjoyed genuine fellowship with God. Their salvation, like ours, was possible only through Christ, even though they had no direct awareness of him. In the same way, it is at least conceivable that there are "modern-day Jobs" among the unreached today—men and women who, responding faithfully to the light they have, are graciously brought into God's saving purposes through Christ.

Nevertheless, the sobering testimony of the New Testament is that humanity at large fails to live up even to the more modest standard of general revelation. People suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18–23), ignore God's witness in creation, and disregard the voice of conscience. Consequently, there is little reason to be optimistic about large numbers being saved solely through their response to general revelation. Still, the point stands: salvation is universally accessible through God's self-disclosure in nature and conscience. Therefore, the problem raised by religious diversity cannot be reduced to the claim that God would unjustly condemn those who were simply uninformed or misinformed about Christ.

It seems, then, that the real challenge is not simply about hell, nor about ignorance of Christ, but something deeper: if God is truly all-knowing, then he foresaw exactly who would freely embrace the gospel and who would not. And here some very difficult questions emerge.

1. Why did God not bring the gospel to those he knew would accept it if only they heard?
Consider, for instance, a young woman living in the Himalayan mountains centuries ago, long before the message of Christ ever reached her village. Call her *Lhamo*. As she gazes at the majesty of the mountains and the heavens above, she senses that such grandeur must be the handiwork of a divine Creator. Looking inward, her conscience tells her that human beings ought to live in harmony and kindness, honoring the One who made them.

But instead of worshiping the Creator and living in love toward others, Lhamo turns to local deities and superstitions, and she mistreats those around her. On that basis, she stands guilty before God for ignoring the witness of nature and conscience. Yet suppose further: had missionaries reached her village in her lifetime, she would have heard the gospel, placed her trust in Christ, and been saved. In that case, her eternal destiny seems to have been determined not by her choice alone, but by sheer accident—by being born in a time and place cut off from the good news. Her condemnation may be just, but is it consistent with the love of God that salvation or damnation could hinge on geography and history?

2. Why did God create the world at all, knowing that multitudes would reject the gospel and be lost?
Since creation itself was a free act of God, why not simply refrain from

creating free creatures altogether, rather than permit a world in which so many perish?

3. Why did God not create a world in which everyone freely accepts the gospel?
Surely such a world seems possible, since humans are free either to believe or not believe. Why, then, did God not choose to actualize a world in which all freely embrace Christ and are saved?

These are profound questions. Do they mean that Christianity ultimately portrays God as arbitrary, cruel, or unloving? Or is there a deeper response available?

It is easy for our thinking about such an emotionally charged issue to become clouded by feelings. To consider it fairly, we need to step back and examine the logical structure of the problem more carefully.

The challenge resembles the **logical problem of suffering** discussed earlier: the claim that it is impossible for God to be both all-powerful and all-loving while some people never hear the gospel and are lost. Put more formally, the pluralist suggests that the following two statements are logically inconsistent:

1. God is all-powerful and all-loving.
2. Some people never hear the gospel and are lost.

Clearly, there is no **explicit contradiction** between these two claims. So if they are to be judged inconsistent, there must be hidden premises making the conflict explicit. What might those hidden assumptions be?

It seems the pluralist must be assuming something like this:

3. If God is all-powerful, then he can create a world in which everyone hears the gospel and is freely saved.
4. If God is all-loving, then he prefers a world in which everyone hears the gospel and is freely saved.

If both assumptions are necessarily true, then God both can and would create such a world. But since (2) affirms that some people never hear the gospel and are lost, a contradiction follows.

At first glance, it seems unproblematic to affirm that God could create a world where everyone hears the gospel. But could he ensure that everyone in such a world is **freely saved**? Here lies the difficulty. For if people are genuinely free, there is no guarantee they will all embrace God's grace. It is **logically impossible** to compel someone to freely do something—this is as incoherent as a round square or a married bachelor. Omnipotence does not extend to the logically impossible.

Thus, it may well be that **no feasible world** exists in which everyone who hears the gospel freely accepts it. For all we know, in every possible world of free creatures God could create, some would still reject his saving grace. In that case, assumption (3) is not necessarily true.

But what about the claim that, if God is all-loving, he must prefer a world of universal salvation? Again, not necessarily. Suppose that the only worlds where everyone freely accepts the gospel are sparsely populated worlds with only a few people. If God were to create more people, some of them would inevitably reject him. Must God prefer such tiny worlds over a more populous world in which multitudes are saved, even if others freely choose to be lost? It is far from obvious.

So long as God extends sufficient grace for salvation to all whom he creates, it does not follow that he is less loving for choosing a world rich in redeemed people, even if it also includes some who freely reject him. Thus, assumption (4) is not necessarily true either. Since neither hidden premise is necessarily true, the pluralist's argument fails to demonstrate a contradiction. But we can go further: we can show that it is entirely possible that God is all-powerful, all-loving, and that many people never hear the gospel and are lost.

As a loving Creator, God's aim would be to maximize the number of the saved while minimizing the number of the lost. In other words, he seeks an **optimal balance**. It is possible that the actual world achieves such a balance: in order to bring about this many people who freely receive salvation, God also had to allow this many who freely reject him. Had God created a world with fewer people in hell, perhaps that world would also have had fewer people in heaven.

And what of those who never hear the gospel but seem as though they might have believed it if they had? How can we know such people exist at all? It is equally possible that God has providentially ordered the

world so that all who never hear the gospel are precisely those who, even if they had heard, would still have rejected it. On this view, no one could justly complain on Judgment Day, "If only I had heard the gospel, I would have believed!" For God could rightly respond, "No—you would not have believed, even if you had heard."

Thus, we arrive at a crucial possibility:

5. God has created a world that achieves an optimal balance between the saved and the lost, such that those who never hear the gospel are precisely those who would have rejected it even if they had heard.

So long as (5) is even possibly true, it shows that there is no logical inconsistency between God's power and love on the one hand, and the reality that some people never hear the gospel and are lost on the other.

With this framework in place, we are now in a position to consider possible answers to the three difficult questions raised earlier.

Let's now turn to the three difficult questions, this time in reverse order.

(3) Why didn't God create a world in which everyone freely believes the gospel and is saved?
The simple answer is that such a world may not be *feasible* for God to create. If a world of universal free acceptance were genuinely possible, then, all else being equal, a loving God would surely have created it. But once God chose to create genuinely free creatures, he had to allow for the tragic possibility that some would resist his grace, no matter how earnestly he sought to draw them to himself. True freedom entails that rejection remains a live option. Thus, while God desires universal salvation, the reality of libertarian freedom means that not every possible world achieves it.

(2) Why did God create the world at all, knowing that so many would not believe the gospel and be lost?
The answer lies in God's purpose for creation. He created out of love, with the intention of sharing fellowship with creatures capable of knowing him. This is an incommensurable good. God understood that some would freely spurn his love, but he also knew that countless others would freely embrace his grace. Should those who reject God

have the power to prevent others from receiving the blessing of eternal life? To deny creation for the sake of the lost would be, in effect, to let those who hate God exercise veto power over his creative will. Instead, God, in his providence, ordered history in such a way as to achieve the best possible balance—maximizing the number of the saved while minimizing the number of the lost.

(1) Why didn't God bring the gospel to people who he knew would accept it if they heard it, even though they reject the light of general revelation available to them?
The answer may be that no such persons exist. In his sovereignty, God has so arranged human history that those who would freely accept the gospel if they heard it, in fact do hear it. As the message spread outward from first-century Palestine, God placed people in its path who would respond positively. Whenever the gospel reaches a region, God ensures that those who would embrace it are given the opportunity. Conversely, those who never hear the gospel are precisely those who, even if they had heard, would not have believed. No one, therefore, is lost merely because of historical or geographical accident. Anyone who genuinely wants salvation—or even would want it under the right conditions—receives the opportunity for it.

These are, of course, *possible* answers, but that is enough to dissolve any claim of logical inconsistency between God's being all-loving and all-powerful on the one hand, and some people never hearing the gospel on the other. The mere possibility shows that the charge of contradiction fails.

What is striking is that these philosophical reflections also resonate strongly with Scripture. In Paul's address to the philosophers of the Areopagus in Athens, he declared:

"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and ... gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being." (Acts 17:24–28 NIV)

This scriptural testimony aligns almost seamlessly with the conclusions reached by reason: God governs the boundaries of history and geography so that every person who would respond to his grace does, in fact, have that opportunity.

The pluralist might grant that it is *logically possible* for God to be both all-powerful and all-loving while still allowing some people to never hear the gospel and be lost. Yet, he may object that such a scenario is *improbable*. After all, people typically adopt the religion of the culture in which they are raised. From this observation, the pluralist argues that it is highly likely that many of those who never hear the gospel would, had they been raised in a Christian society, have embraced it and been saved. On this basis, he claims that the hypothesis I have offered is deeply implausible.

At first glance, such reasoning seems persuasive. Surely it would be astronomically improbable if, purely by coincidence, every person who fails to hear the gospel also happens to be someone who would have rejected it even if he had heard. But this misrepresents the claim. The hypothesis is not that such a result arises from chance, but that a sovereign and provident God has *ordered* the world in this way. If God possesses knowledge not only of all actual events but also of how every person would freely respond under any set of circumstances, then it is entirely reasonable to suppose that he has orchestrated history accordingly.

What's crucial to see is that such a providentially ordered world would be outwardly indistinguishable from one in which the circumstances of a person's birth are determined by mere historical accident. It is true that people generally adopt the religion of their culture. It is also true that many born in non-Christian settings would likely have identified as Christian had they been raised in Christian contexts. But that is not the same thing as entering into a saving relationship with God. Nominal or cultural Christianity is not equivalent to genuine, transformative faith in Christ.

Moreover, there are no reliable psychological or sociological indicators that allow us to predict which individuals will truly embrace Christ in faith. Human conversion is not reducible to sociological determinism or personality profiles. For this reason, a world sovereignly governed by God—so that everyone who would freely respond to the gospel does, in fact, hear it—would look no different, on the surface, from a world

where the distribution of religions appears to be a matter of cultural happenstance.

Therefore, it is difficult to see how the hypothesis I've defended can reasonably be dismissed as improbable—unless one can show that the very existence of a God endowed with such providential knowledge is itself implausible. But no such demonstration has ever been successfully offered.

Part C – On the Mind-Body Problem

Most people naturally sense that they are not the same as their physical bodies. Throughout history, nearly every culture, unless taught to think otherwise, has believed in some kind of life after death. This conviction tends to arise when a person reflects seriously on the nature of human existence. Within the history of the church, Christian thinkers have generally agreed that Scripture affirms a unified yet dual reality in human beings. On the one hand, people exist as integrated wholes; on the other, they are composed of both an immaterial soul or spirit and a material body, each of which is inherently good.

Although there has been ongoing debate about whether the soul and spirit are identical or distinct, and while the biblical terms for them—*nepes* and *psyché* for soul, *ruah* and *pneuma* for spirit—are used in diverse ways, the overall biblical witness remains clear. The soul or spirit is an immaterial reality distinct from the body (Eccl. 12:7; Matt. 10:28). Death itself is described as the soul's departure from the body (Gen. 35:18; 1 Kings 17:21–22). After death, the soul continues in a disembodied state, awaiting the resurrection of the body (Luke 23:46; 2 Cor. 5:1–10; Phil. 1:21–24; Heb. 12:23). At the same time, Scripture acknowledges that animals, as living beings, also possess souls, though these are different in kind from human souls, and there is little reason to believe that they survive death (Gen. 1:30; Rev. 8:9).

This biblical teaching naturally intersects with a field of philosophy known as the philosophy of mind. At the heart of that discipline is the long-debated mind–body problem, which will now claim our attention.

In some contexts, it is both possible and valuable to distinguish between the mind, the soul, the spirit, and the ego or self. For the purposes of this discussion, however, we will treat these terms interchangeably. Our primary task is to address two preliminary matters, beginning with a statement of the mind–body problem, which itself raises two central questions. The first is whether consciousness—or mental properties more broadly—can be reduced to the physical, or whether they are irreducibly mental in nature. Closely tied to this is the question of whether the human self, assuming it exists, is purely physical or immaterial. If consciousness and the self are not reducible to the physical, then we must ask whether mind and matter interact and, if they do, how such interaction is possible. The second preliminary matter is to survey the principal options concerning the nature of

consciousness and the constitution of the human person. We begin, then, by considering the different positions that attempt to explain the character of consciousness, including experiences such as sensations and thoughts.

There are two primary approaches to understanding mental consciousness and mental properties: physicalism and dualism, each with its own variations. Physicalism maintains, in one form or another, that consciousness is entirely physical.[206] Dualism, by contrast, comes in two distinct forms. The first is mere property dualism, which recognizes that mental properties or consciousness are not physical but are irreducibly mental. However, proponents of mere property dualism contend that consciousness is borne by or located within a physical entity, such as the brain or body. This position is often, though not always, linked with emergentism, the view that once matter reaches a certain level of complexity, a new kind of property—such as painfulness—emerges that is not found in or reducible to the underlying physical base that produced it. In this sense, consciousness exists within and depends upon the brain. The second form, which we will call simply property dualism, argues that consciousness itself is immaterial and that its subject or bearer is also immaterial—whether described as a soul, mind, or self. Thus, unlike mere property dualism, this view necessarily entails substance dualism, since it locates both consciousness and its bearer beyond the physical.

What, then, is physicalism? The term itself is not easy to pin down, since, as noted earlier, several different positions fall under its umbrella, and it often refers simply to whatever version happens to be in vogue at a given time. Still, the concept can be made more precise. Historically, *materialism* referred to the belief that the only substances that exist are material ones. Yet this did not rule out the possibility that some material substances—such as living organisms—might also possess immaterial properties, or that immaterial abstract objects like sets or universals could exist. In contrast, physicalism today usually carries a more restrictive meaning. In its strict form, it holds that absolutely everything is a physical entity: all substances, properties, and events are nothing more than physical. Strict physicalists typically

[206] Importantly, some Christian philosophers and theologians—including Nancey Murphy and Joel B. Green—defend versions of physicalism, according to which human consciousness is wholly dependent on physical or biological processes. In that framework, the hope of the Christian afterlife is usually placed on bodily resurrection rather than on the continued existence of an immaterial soul.

reject the existence of abstract objects, though some make exceptions. Other physicalists, however, maintain that while there are only physical substances, genuinely mental properties can emerge from and depend upon physical bases. This latter view is effectively a version of mere property dualism and will be treated as such in our discussion.

But what does it mean to call something a *physical* entity? The term can be understood in three different ways. First, physical may refer to whatever can be described in the language of physics and chemistry. Second, it can be extended to include anything accounted for by the physical sciences more broadly, such as biology. Third, it may be used in the commonsense sense of physical, covering primary qualities like shape, mass, size, and motion, while excluding secondary qualities like color, taste, smell, and sound that are tied to a single sense organ. In its restricted sense, then, physicalism asserts that all entities are physical in one of these ways.

For our purposes, we will use the first and most restrictive definition, taking "physical" to mean whatever can be described by physics and chemistry—that is, only configurations and hierarchies of elementary particles truly exist. This is the definition most often employed by physicalists, and it reflects the core motivation behind the view: the conviction that science, especially the physical sciences, provides the ultimate explanation of reality. This confidence rests on two related claims. The unity of science asserts that, once fully developed, physics and chemistry would yield a complete and unified account of all phenomena, since the world is fundamentally a single physical system. The authority of science asserts either that only the hard sciences provide rational knowledge of the real world (a position known as strong scientism), or that while other disciplines may generate beliefs, the authority and reliability of science far surpass them.

From the standpoint of strict physicalism, a human being is nothing more than a physical entity. The only things that exist are physical substances, properties, and events. In the human case, this means the living body, or more specifically, the brain and central nervous system. The brain as a physical substance has measurable properties such as weight, volume, size, electrical activity, and chemical composition. Within the brain, physical events constantly occur: elongated cells known as neurons transmit impulses that account for its functioning.

Neurons communicate with one another through points of contact known as synapses. Among these, C fibers are a particular type of neuron that extend into the skin and transmit signals associated with pain. From the standpoint of physicalism, when a person experiences pain or entertains a thought, these are nothing more than physical events—instances of C fibers firing or electrical and chemical processes occurring within the brain and central nervous system. On this view, a human being is simply a physical organism, consisting of a brain and nervous system or a living body, which possesses physical properties and undergoes physical events.

But what exactly is matter? Surprisingly, there is no definitive answer, and our knowledge of matter's ultimate nature remains limited. Still, identifying examples is straightforward: computers, neurons, carbon atoms, and billiard balls are all material objects. Physical properties, in turn, are those that belong exclusively to such physical objects. They include traits cataloged in physics and chemistry, such as hardness, spatial extension and motion, shape, chemical and electrical characteristics, magnetic and gravitational forces, density, mass, malleability, elasticity, and breakability. A physical event can then be described as the occurrence, continuation, or cessation of one or more of these properties in a physical substance—or among several substances—at a given time.

One important observation follows from this: material substances, properties, and events do not require consciousness in order to exist or be described. Nothing in the scientific accounts of physics or chemistry invokes consciousness as part of the definition of matter. A purely physical description of the world would be entirely devoid of any reference to, or characterization of, conscious experience.

Here, property and substance dualists part ways with physicalists. Both forms of dualism affirm that mental entities are real and that the mind and its contents are fundamentally nonphysical. Defining a mental entity is not easy, but several attempts have been made. Some suggest that a mental entity is something that could not exist in the absence of sentient beings. Others describe it as something a subject knows better than anyone else, or something to which the subject alone has direct, first-person access. Mental entities, then, belong to the private domain of inner experience.

Despite the difficulty of definition, examples are plentiful: the sensation of pain, the emotion of anger, the thought of lunch, the belief that two plus two equals four, or the desire for ice cream. In what follows, we will turn to a more detailed analysis of consciousness itself, followed by arguments supporting its irreducibly mental character.

A basic and uncontested principle of identity holds that if two entities, x and y, are identical, then whatever is true of x must also be true of y, and whatever is true of y must also be true of x. This is because x and y would not merely resemble each other but would in fact be the very same entity. Moreover, identity is not a contingent matter. Something does not merely happen to be identical with itself; rather, if x is identical with y, then it is necessarily so. It is metaphysically impossible for one to exist without the other, since they are by nature the same.

Physicalists are committed to the claim that what we call mental entities either do not exist at all or, if they do, are nothing more than physical entities. For example, they may argue that mental states are simply brain states, properties of the brain, bodily behaviors, or dispositions to behave. On this view, pain is not an inward sensation of hurtfulness but merely the disposition to cry out “ouch!” when pricked by a pin. If physicalism is correct, then everything true of the brain or the body—including its states, properties, and dispositions—must also be true of the mind, and everything true of the mind must likewise be true of the brain or body. Consequently, if we can identify even a single property or possibility that belongs to the mind but not the brain, or to the brain but not the mind, then physicalism collapses and some form of dualism is established.

It is important here to distinguish identity from other relations, such as causation or correlation. Brain events may indeed cause mental events, and mental events may in turn cause brain or bodily events. For example, certain electrical activity in the brain may give rise to the experience of pain, and the intention to raise one’s arm may trigger the physical processes that result in movement. Similarly, it may be that every mental occurrence corresponds with some measurable neural activity. Yet causation and correlation do not amount to identity. A and B can be constantly connected without being the same thing. Consider the case of trilaterality (having three sides) and triangularity (having three angles). These properties are inseparably linked—something trilateral is necessarily triangular—but the two properties are not identical.

For physicalism to hold, it is not sufficient that mental and physical states be causally connected or constantly correlated. Physicalism requires identity. If it can be shown that something is true—or even *possibly true*—of a mental substance, property, or event that is not true or possibly true of any physical substance, property, or event, then physicalism is false.

This forms the basis of a central dualist strategy: to demonstrate the non-identity of mental and physical states and of the self or soul with the brain or body. A further dualist strategy appeals to features of human existence that cannot be accounted for if we are nothing more than physical particulars. Among these features are our persistence of personal identity over time despite accidental changes, and our possession of libertarian free will. These realities are far more plausibly explained if we are immaterial selves or souls.

The nature of consciousness is, in many ways, straightforward. Imagine waking in the recovery room after surgery while still under the lingering effects of anesthesia. At first, faint sounds reach your ears, which gradually separate into two distinct voices. Soon you detect a dull ache in your ankle. The sharp smell of rubbing alcohol passes by, and it triggers a memory of a childhood accident. Along with that memory comes a feeling of aversion. You notice a thirst and a desire for a drink. Opening your eyes to a white ceiling, you begin to think about leaving the hospital. What is happening? Quite simply, you are regaining consciousness.

Two observations arise from this example. First, while any physical object, state, or process can be fully described from a third-person perspective, descriptions of conscious states require a first-person point of view. Second, states of consciousness are best defined ostensively—that is, by pointing to particular examples. A workable definition is this: consciousness is what you are aware of when you engage in first-person introspection. Both of these observations align precisely with what dualism would predict.

Different features of consciousness can also be distinguished. One is phenomenal consciousness. Phenomenal properties, often called *qualia*, involve the raw feel or the "what-it-is-like" of being in a given state. There is a distinct what-it-is-like to feeling pain, tasting a lemon, hearing a musical note, or simply being yourself. Some philosophers attempt to limit phenomenal consciousness to sensations. It is true that

the raw quality of a pain or a lemon's taste is more vivid than the feel of entertaining a thought—such as the thought that George Washington was the first U.S. president—or of holding a belief, such as that snow is white. Yet it would be far too narrow to restrict phenomenal consciousness in this way. If thoughts, beliefs, and desires lacked introspectively discernible differences, it would be impossible to know by introspection which thought or belief one was entertaining. But in fact, we do this constantly. For example, the thought about Washington and the thought about snow are distinguishable precisely because each carries a different "what-it-is-like" quality.

Another important feature is the epistemic subjectivity of consciousness, which includes three aspects. The first is direct access. My awareness of external objects—say, of water in its solid state—comes through sensations of those objects. But my awareness of my own conscious states, such as pain, is immediate and does not depend on a secondary awareness directed at that pain, though such higher-order reflection is possible. By simply being in pain, I am directly aware of it. For this reason, conscious properties are often called self-presenting. When I look at a red apple, the sensation of red presents both the apple's surface—the intentional object, indirectly given through the sensation—and the sensation of red itself, which is directly accessible to me. In contrast, no physical state or property is given in this way. Even my own brain states are accessible only indirectly, either by reflection or by reading them off a monitor.

The second aspect is epistemic authority. Provided I am paying attention and not distracted, I know what is happening in my own conscious life with greater certainty than anyone else could. A neuroscientist may know more about my brain states than I do, but not about my mental states. One might imagine that, given advances in science, researchers could eventually determine my conscious states simply by reading my brain. Yet to produce a reliable correlation between brain states and conscious states, scientists must ask subjects to report their inner experiences while brain activity is recorded. Any correlation chart is therefore dependent on, and weaker than, the subject's own introspective knowledge.

The third aspect is private access. Knowledge of physical entities—rocks, chemicals, or brain states—is public in nature. Whatever means you use to discover their properties, I could use as well. If you measure an object's mass or length, I can replicate that measurement. Conscious states, however, are different. I have access to my own mental states by

introspection in a way that no one else does. As Thomas Nagel has famously argued, even if we knew every physical fact about bats, we would still have no idea what it is like *to be* a bat. That subjective experience remains privately accessible to the bat alone.

Some philosophers argue that epistemic subjectivity, with its three features of direct access, epistemic authority, and private access, is merely epistemic in nature and has no ontological significance. On this view, such subjectivity does not establish that conscious states are irreducibly immaterial or distinct from brain states. Just as an apple can be known in two different ways—by sight or by touch—yet remains the same apple, so too, it is claimed, brain states can be known in two ways: through first-person introspection, marked by epistemic subjectivity, and through third-person neuroscientific description. But this, they insist, does not imply that there are two entities—conscious states and brain states—but only two ways of knowing the same thing.

There are, however, strong reasons to reject this conclusion. First, it is doubtful that a "way of knowing" is itself a physical phenomenon. Ways of knowing involve intentionality (they are about something) and normativity (under certain conditions, one ought to accept what they disclose). Mere physical states of the brain exhibit neither of these. Second, the three features of epistemic subjectivity are best understood as ontological, not merely epistemic. If a person were nothing more than a physical object composed of brain states, these features could not be genuine, since they do not apply to physical states. They make sense only if conscious states are immaterial, for they reflect ways of relating to nonphysical realities.

A further feature of consciousness is point-of-view subjectivity. Every conscious state necessarily belongs to a subject; the very idea of a subjectless conscious state floating free is incoherent. Moreover, conscious states always occur from a particular perspective—they reflect the subject's unique vantage point on the world, shaping the way he or she experiences and thinks about reality.

Some philosophers, such as Lynne Rudder Baker, regard the first-person point of view as a property a person exemplifies. For example, Smith might be said to have the property of being-the-first-person-point-of-view. Yet this analysis is problematic for two reasons. First, if such a property exists, it would be what philosophers call an impure property, one that can only be defined by reference to a particular

entity, such as “being identical to Socrates” or “being to the left of a desk.” Such a property cannot constitute or individuate the entity it refers to, because it already presupposes its existence. In the same way, if Smith exemplifies being-the-first-person-point-of-view, that property presupposes the prior existence of Smith as a person. Smith must already be ontologically present in order to have the property.

Kevin Corcoran shares Baker’s view of the central role of the first-person perspective in personhood, noting that only persons exemplify it. But his own point strengthens the objection: if persons *have* this property, they must exist prior to exemplifying it, just as an apple must exist before it can exemplify being red. It follows that being-the-first-person-perspective cannot constitute personhood, since it presupposes the prior existence of persons who exemplify it.

A second problem is that there may be no such property at all. The first-person perspective is better understood not as a property that persons have but as what persons *are*. One can analyze it reductively as follows: S has a first-person perspective if S is a sentient, personal kind of substance with the characteristic properties and potentialities of persons, such as self-awareness. In other words, persons are substantial, unified centers of consciousness. They exemplify ordinary mental properties—having a thought, experiencing red, feeling pain—but they do not exemplify an additional property of being-a-first-person-perspective. That phrase simply describes the fact that a substantial, sentient person, in virtue of having ordinary mental states, already possesses a perspective. No further property is required.

So far, we have offered an ostensive definition of consciousness and described several of its features. Philosophers also distinguish between two kinds of consciousness: phenomenal and access. Phenomenal consciousness refers to the raw qualitative character of experience, the “what-it-is-like” of a state. Access consciousness, by contrast, refers to those states available for guiding speech, directing action, or being used in reasoning. It is possible to have phenomenal consciousness without access consciousness. For instance, imagine looking at a chart filled with numbers. You have a vivid awareness of the chart—phenomenal consciousness—but you may not be able to recall or report each number, reproduce the chart from memory, or use the numbers in reasoning. In such a case, you have phenomenal consciousness without access consciousness.

Some suggest the reverse is also possible: access without phenomenal consciousness. Cases of blindsight illustrate this possibility. Patients with blindsight have blind spots in their visual fields. They report no awareness of objects placed within those blind spots, yet when asked to identify the shapes of such objects, they do so with statistically significant accuracy. This has led to two competing interpretations. One holds that the subjects have no phenomenal consciousness of the objects at all, but neural pathways still process the stimuli and trigger accurate reports. The other maintains that the subjects do possess first-order awareness of the objects, but a defect prevents them from achieving second-order awareness—that is, awareness of being aware. On this interpretation, they are conscious of the objects but not conscious of their own consciousness of them.

Finally, philosophers identify at least five major kinds of conscious states, all of which involve phenomenal consciousness. Sensations are basic states of awareness, such as hearing a sound or feeling pain, and emotions are a subclass of these, such as being aware of something in an angry way. Thoughts are mental contents expressible in full propositions and capable of logical relations: some entail others, while others merely provide evidential support. Beliefs are a person's considered judgments, held with varying degrees of confidence, about how things really are. Desires are felt inclinations toward or away from certain states of affairs. And acts of will are choices—exercises of agency—typically directed toward achieving some purpose.

A central issue in the philosophy of mind is whether properties such as being in pain or having a thought—and the states or events composed of them, such as an episode of pain or an act of thinking—are genuinely mental or reducible to the physical. The position known as property dualism, or mere-property dualism, holds that conscious properties and events are irreducibly mental rather than physical. To follow this argument, recall the law of identity: if x is identical to y, then whatever is true of x must also be true of y, and vice versa. If even a single feature can be found that is true, or even possibly true, of x but not of y, then x and y cannot be identical, even if one depends upon the other for its functioning.

Property dualists argue that mental states cannot be physical because they display features absent in physical states:

(a) Mental states have a raw qualitative character, a "what-it-is-like" quality—for instance, the felt hurt of pain.

(b) Many mental states possess intentionality: they are inherently *of* or *about* something beyond themselves.

(c) Mental states are inner, private, and immediately accessible only to the subject who experiences them.

(d) Mental states require a subjective ontology, meaning they necessarily belong to the sentient beings who have them.

(e) Mental states lack defining features of physical states, such as spatial extension, determinate location, or structural composition out of parts, and they cannot be exhaustively described in physical language.

From these premises, property dualists conclude that mental states are fundamentally nonphysical in nature, even if they depend on the brain for their operation.

Once consciousness is accurately described, it becomes evident that mental properties and events are not identical with physical properties and events. Mental states are defined by their intrinsic, subjective, inner, and private qualities, directly accessible to the subject through first-person introspection. There is a distinctive *what-it-is-like* to experiencing pain, to feeling pleasure, or to entertaining a thought about George Washington. By contrast, there is no *what-it-is-like* to being an electron, a neuron, or a pattern of synaptic firing—or to any physical state at all. Moreover, while brain states may be described in terms of their causal or functional relation to mental states, they can also be fully and intrinsically characterized in physical language. Mental states, however, cannot be intrinsically captured in physical terms.

As argued earlier, mental states also connect uniquely to the three features of epistemic subjectivity: direct access, epistemic authority, and private access. These features make sense only if consciousness is

immaterial. Physical states, such as brain events, must always be accessed indirectly, and because they are public in nature, they cannot sustain the notions of epistemic authority or private access.

Further differences reinforce this conclusion. Certain sensations are pleasurable or unpleasant, but physical states themselves possess no such qualities. A cut on the knee is not unpleasant in itself; the unpleasantness belongs to the pain it causes. Mental states can also have the property of familiarity—such as when a desk looks familiar—but familiarity is not a trait of any physical configuration. Consider pain again. When one experiences pain, C fibers in the nervous system may be firing. This firing is a highly complex structural property involving countless atoms, molecules, and neurons organized in intricate geometrical arrangements and patterns of synaptic activity. By contrast, the property of being a pain is simple, not a composite of many parts arranged in structure.

These contrasts show that mental states cannot be identical with physical states. Physicalists have often responded by denying that consciousness has such features. For instance, dualists argue that thoughts lack geometrical properties like size, shape, and location, even though the brain events correlated with them clearly do. Physicalists counter that thoughts are located in specific regions of the brain. But there is little reason to accept this claim. Dualists can account for spatial factors entirely in terms of the brain events causally associated with thoughts. It is those neural events that possess size, shape, and location—properties that can even be projected on a computer screen. The thoughts themselves do not have spatial dimensions. Indeed, it seems to commit a category error to ask about the shape or size of one's thought of George Washington, or whether that thought is closer to one's left ear than one's thought of snow. Introspection tells us much about the features of our thoughts, but spatial location is not among them. Dualists extend this kind of response to other attempts by physicalists to explain away the distinctive features of consciousness.

A second major argument for property or event dualism is the **knowledge argument**, developed in different forms by Thomas Nagel, Frank Jackson (who later abandoned it for reasons that, it seems to me, are unconvincing), and Saul Kripke. The standard thought experiment is this: Mary, a brilliant scientist blind from birth, possesses exhaustive knowledge of all the physical facts relevant to perception. When she suddenly gains sight, however, she acquires new knowledge—facts she did not and could not know before. Since she already knew every

physical fact, and since she nonetheless learns something new, what she learns cannot be physical. Rather, the new knowledge must concern mental facts.

To grasp the force of this argument, we must focus on the nature of self-presenting properties and three distinct forms of knowledge. A self-presenting property, such as being-an-appearing-of-red, reveals both its intentional object (for example, a red apple) and itself to the subject experiencing it. When someone perceives an apple, he is aware not only of the apple but also of the experience of seeing the apple. Regarding knowledge, philosophers commonly distinguish three irreducible forms, though one can serve as the epistemic ground for another. (1) **Knowledge by acquaintance** is direct awareness of something—for instance, seeing an apple before you and thereby knowing it directly, without needing the concept or the word *apple*. (2) **Propositional knowledge** is knowledge that a given proposition is true, such as knowing that "the object before me is an apple." This requires having the concept of an apple and recognizing that the object fits that concept. (3) **Know-how** is the ability to perform certain actions, such as using apples in cooking. In general, acquaintance grounds propositional knowledge, which in turn enables genuine know-how: it is because I see the apple that I know it is an apple, and because I know what an apple is that I can use it skillfully.

Applied to Mary's case, when she first experiences the self-presenting property of redness—when she has the sensation of red—she acquires six new forms of knowledge. With respect both to the color red and to her sensation of red, she gains acquaintance, propositional knowledge, and know-how. She now knows redness by acquaintance; upon reflection, she can form propositions such as "Necessarily, red is a color." She gains practical skill as well: the ability to compare and sort objects by color, to design aesthetically pleasing color patterns, and more. If we assume a realist dualist account of secondary qualities—colors, sounds, tastes, smells, textures—then objects truly possess these features. A tree falling in a forest, even with no one present, makes a sound. On this realist construal, Mary's new knowledge is not itself knowledge *of* mental facts but forms of knowledge accessible only through mental states that exemplify the relevant self-presenting property. One must actually have the sensation of red in order to acquire these forms of knowledge about redness.

In addition, Mary gains knowledge of her own sensation of red. She becomes directly aware, for the first time, of what it is like to have that

sensation, and she can further recognize it as pleasurable, faint, or vivid. She acquires propositional knowledge about her sensations: for example, that a sensation of red is more similar to orange than to sourness, or that the apple now looks more vivid than the orange did yesterday under dim light. She also develops skill regarding her sensations—recalling them in memory, imagining them afresh, or adjusting her glasses to sharpen their vividness. In this way, Mary's new experience provides a wide range of knowledge that could not be obtained from physical information alone.

Physicalists such as David Papineau and Paul Churchland have put forward slightly different versions of the most prominent response to the knowledge argument.[207] On their account, when Mary first sees red, she does not acquire knowledge of any new facts. Instead, she acquires new abilities, new behavioral dispositions, new skills, and new ways of accessing facts she already knew. Before regaining sight, Mary already possessed complete knowledge of all the physical facts relevant to what-it-is-like to experience red. She could describe, in third-person terms, what another person's experience of red would be like. Since experiences of red are simply physical states of the brain, and Mary already had mastery of the relevant physical theory, she knew what it is like to see red in principle. What changes is that she now acquires a prelinguistic representation of redness, a first-person ability to imagine red or reproduce the experience in memory. She can now recognize, reidentify, and classify her own experiences of red by means of a new inner capacity for introspection. Whereas before she could only identify red "from the outside" by observing others' behavior, she now does so directly "from the inside." On this view, then, Mary acquires a new kind of knowledge—know-how or ability—but not knowledge of new facts. The physicalist thus allows for a duality of kinds of knowledge but not for a duality of facts.

This response, however, is inadequate for at least three reasons. First, it is simply false to say that Mary merely gains a new way of knowing what she already knew. As noted earlier, Mary acquires factual knowledge she did not previously possess. It is difficult to deny that she learns something new about the world itself, not just about how to access or represent what she already knew.

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[207] David Papineau, *Philosophical Naturalism* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), 103-14; Paul M. Churchland, *Matter and Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), 33-34.

Second, this response seems to rely on a coarse-grained theory of properties, according to which two properties are considered identical if they are always coexemplified, whether contingently or necessarily. Thus the property of being-an-appearing-of-red can be identified with the property of being brain state A, since they occur together. But this account is untenable. Being triangular and being trilateral, for example, are distinct properties even though they are necessarily coexemplified. Similarly, certain unexemplified properties, such as being a unicorn or being a Vulcan, and even unexemplifiable properties, such as being a square circle, are distinct properties despite being coexemplified by no objects at all. If the coarse-grained theory were correct, these would all collapse into sameness, which is absurd.

Third, Papineau and Churchland's own description of Mary's new know-how tacitly borrows concepts that are, in fact, deeply dualistic. They speak of *prelinguistic representation*, *mental imagery*, and *first-person introspection*. These notions are not reducible to the vocabulary of physicalism. Indeed, they serve as the real intuition pumps behind the physicalist rejoinder. If one strips away the dualist language and attempts to reframe their explanation entirely in physicalist terms, the argument loses its force and appears implausible.

The third argument for property or event dualism rests on intentionality. Some, and perhaps all, mental states exhibit intentionality, while no physical state does. Therefore, at least some mental states must be nonphysical. Intentionality refers to the "ofness" or "aboutness" of mental states. Consider the following facts:

1. When one introspectively attends to one's own conscious states, no sense data are associated with those states (a thought, for example, has no color). Physical states, however, do possess sense data (a brain state may be gray).
2. Intentionality is completely unrestricted in its possible objects: any entity whatsoever may be the object of a mental act. By contrast, physical relations obtain only among a limited range of entities (e.g., a magnetic field attracts only certain materials).
3. To grasp a mental act requires a reflexive act of self-awareness, whereas no such reflexivity is needed to grasp a physical relation.
4. In ordinary physical relations (e.g., *x* is to the left of *y*), the relata are identifiable objects independently of their relation. A desk and a lamp could exist without being positioned to the

left or right of each other. By contrast, intentional contents are partly constituted by their object: one and the same belief cannot be about a frog and later about a house; its identity is fixed by its intentional content.

5. Physical relations require the existence of all relata (*x* and *y* must both exist for one to be on top of the other). Intentionality, however, can be directed at nonexistent objects (e.g., one can think about Zeus).

Many physicalists, particularly functionalists, attempt to reduce intentionality to causal or functional relations. They analyze mental states in terms of bodily inputs, behavioral outputs, and causal links to other mental states. On this account, a pain is not an intrinsically qualitative state characterized by hurtfulness, but rather a functional kind: the state produced by pinpricks and related to grimacing, saying "ouch," and desiring relief. The desire for pity, in turn, is defined in terms of further behavioral and mental outputs. By this reasoning, even an inanimate computer could be said to be "conscious"—in pain or having a thought—so long as it produced the right outputs when given the right inputs.

Dualists challenge this view with thought experiments that distinguish causal/functional relations from genuine intentionality. John Searle's well-known "Chinese room" argument illustrates the point:

"Imagine that you are locked in a room, and in this room are several baskets full of Chinese symbols. Imagine that you (like me) do not understand a word of Chinese, but that you are given a rule book in English for manipulating the Chinese symbols. The rules specify the manipulations of symbols purely formally, in terms of their syntax, not their semantics. So the rule might say: "Take a squiggle-squiggle out of basket number one and put it next to a squoggle-squoggle sign from basket number two." Now suppose that some other Chinese symbols are passed into the room, and that you are given further rules for passing back Chinese symbols out of the room. Suppose that unknown to you the symbols passed into the room are called "questions" by the people outside the room, and the symbols you pass back out of the room are called "answers to the questions." Suppose, furthermore, that the programmers are so good at designing the programs and that you are so good at

manipulating the symbols, that very soon your answers are indistinguishable from those of a native Chinese speaker. There you are locked in your room shuffling your Chinese symbols and passing out Chinese symbols in response to incoming Chinese symbols. . . . Now the point of the story is simply this: by virtue of implementing a formal computer program from the point of view of an outside observer, you behave exactly as if you understood Chinese, but all the same you don't understand a word of Chinese."[208]

The Chinese room simulates a computer from the perspective of an outside observer, who sees inputs and outputs arranged to mimic understanding. Yet the person in the room has no comprehension of Chinese. In the same way, computers do not genuinely understand or possess intentionality; they merely imitate the operations of a mind.

We have thus seen compelling reasons to affirm property dualism: consciousness and conscious states are genuinely mental, not reducible to the physical. We now turn to consider some of the central arguments against this position.

A number of objections have been raised against dualism, and we will consider three of them along with brief responses. The first objection is that, on a dualist view, mind and body are so radically different that it seems impossible to explain how and where the two interact. How could a soul, lacking all physical properties, act upon the body, or how could the body act upon the soul? How could the soul move the arm, or how could a pin stuck in the finger cause pain in the soul?

The response to this objection begins with the recognition that it assumes a problematic principle: namely, that if we do not know how A causes B, then it is unreasonable to believe A causes B—especially if A and B are different. But this is not a sound assumption. We often know that one thing causes another without understanding how causation occurs, even when the items involved are very different. Consider examples: it is conceivable that God, if he exists, could create or act upon the world, despite being radically different from it. Magnetic fields move tacks, gravity influences planets millions of miles away,

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[208] John Searle, *Minds, Brains, and Science* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 32-33; cf. Searle, "Minds, Brains, and Programs," *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 3 (1980): 417-24.

and protons exert repulsive forces on each other. In such cases, causal interaction between different kinds of entities occurs even though we do not fully understand how. Furthermore, the causes often differ in nature from their effects, as in the case of fields and forces acting on solid, spatially located particles.

When it comes to mind and body, we are directly aware of causal interaction between them. Bodily events such as being pricked with a pin or suffering a head injury cause mental events such as pain or memory loss, while mental states cause bodily changes such as ulcers from worry or the intentional raising of an arm. The evidence for causal interaction between mind and body is so immediate and pervasive that there is no compelling reason to doubt it. Moreover, the demand for an explanation of "how" mind and body interact may be misplaced. To ask how A causes B is typically to ask for an intervening mechanism between them. For example, one can ask how turning a key starts a car because there is an electrical system connecting the two. But mental causation may be direct and immediate, with no intervening mechanism to describe. If so, the "how" question does not apply.

Another version of the objection claims that mental causation would require the creation of new energy in the brain or body, thereby violating the first law of conservation of mass and energy. Three replies can be made. First, the conservation law is not a metaphysical truth that rules out the possibility of new energy; it is a scientific, heuristic principle used for guiding research. Moreover, it applies only to closed systems—those not subject to outside influence. But it begs the question to assume that the brain is a closed system, since the dualist position is precisely that it is open to causal influence from immaterial minds. Second, the energy involved in mental causation may be so small as to be nearly undetectable. Consider the Hoover Dam: the energy required to flip the switch that releases the water is negligible compared to the torrent of energy unleashed by the water itself. Mental causation may be like flipping such a switch, redirecting potential energy already present in the brain rather than creating substantial new energy. Third, quantum entanglement demonstrates that causal influence can occur without the transfer of energy. When two particles are entangled, a measurement on one determines the state of the other, even across vast distances, without any exchange of energy. Mental causation may operate in a similar way.

A final form of the interaction objection appeals to the principle of the causal closure of the physical: if one traces the causal antecedents of

any physical event, one need never appeal to anything outside the physical domain. On this view, only physical causes are required for physical effects. Yet this principle, too, is not a metaphysical law but merely a pragmatic assumption employed in scientific practice. There is no empirical evidence that it is an inviolable truth. Moreover, if mental states are real—as we have argued—then strict adherence to closure would imply that mental states are epiphenomenal: they are caused by the brain but exert no causal influence of their own. On this account, thirst would not cause someone to get a drink; rather, the brain state alone would. This is implausible. Worse still, epiphenomenalism appears to be self-refuting. It asserts that no propositional content in thoughts or beliefs plays a causal role in reasoning or persuasion. If true, then people are determined by nonrational physical processes alone, and no one accepts or rejects propositions on the basis of rational reflection. But in that case, presenting the argument for epiphenomenalism in order to persuade others of its truth would be pointless and self-defeating.

A second objection to dualism appeals to Ockham's razor. This principle holds that one should not multiply entities beyond what is necessary to explain a phenomenon. When two explanations account for the same thing, the simpler one—the one that posits fewer entities or kinds of entities—should be preferred. Physicalism, it is argued, is simpler than dualism because it posits only one kind of entity, matter, to explain human beings, whereas dualism requires two kinds, matter and mind. Thus, by the standard of Ockham's razor, physicalism is to be preferred.

The response to this objection highlights two problems with its application. First, if Ockham's razor is understood in its commonsense form—that an explanation should include only what is necessary to account for the phenomenon—then the principle is uncontroversial. But when applied to the mind-body problem, it becomes question-begging. The dualist appeals precisely to phenomena that physicalism cannot adequately explain, such as consciousness, intentionality, and the first-person perspective. From the dualist standpoint, invoking both mind and matter is not an unnecessary multiplication but a faithful recognition of what is required to account for the facts.

Second, if Ockham's razor is used to shift the burden of proof onto the dualist, the tables may in fact be turned. From first-person awareness, individuals have direct, incorrigible knowledge of their own mental states and private access to them in a way that does not apply to

physical states. In light of this, one has stronger grounds for affirming the existence of genuine mental states than for affirming the truth of physicalism. Thus, the burden of proof may rest with the physicalist. More importantly, Ockham's razor functions only as a tiebreaker, applicable when competing theories are otherwise equal. Since the dualist rejects the claim that dualism and physicalism stand on equal explanatory footing, the principle cannot by itself decide the matter.

A third objection is scientific in nature. It suggests that while dualism cannot be disproven outright, scientific evidence makes it highly improbable. Nancey Murphy, for instance, argues that physicalism is not merely a philosophical thesis but the core commitment of modern scientific research, supported by substantial evidence. According to her, biology, neuroscience, and cognitive science have provided explanations of the dependence of mental faculties—once attributed to the soul—on physical processes. While dualism could always appeal to correlations or functional relations between soul and body, advances in science, she claims, have made it a largely unnecessary hypothesis. As Murphy puts it, science has accumulated overwhelming evidence showing that we do not need to postulate an immaterial soul or mind in order to explain life and consciousness.

The response to this objection points out two problems. First, people do not postulate the existence of conscious states in order to explain behavior, in a way that might be discarded once a better (physicalist) explanation becomes available. Rather, people are directly aware of their conscious states and report them on the basis of what they introspectively know. Consciousness is not a theoretical entity invented for explanatory purposes but an immediately given reality. Second, the claim that neuroscience is the most authoritative discipline for resolving mind-body questions is difficult to defend. Scientific research is limited to describing correlations between mental and physical events; it does not and cannot address the deeper questions about the nature of thought, feeling, or belief, or about the identity of the self. Even if mental states depend on specific brain regions—a claim for which there is also evidence in the other direction—a dualist can readily explain such dependence as correlation or causation without reducing mental states to brain states. The central issues are fundamentally philosophical and cannot be settled by empirical data alone.

This can be illustrated by the example of mirror neurons. Studies have shown that when these neurons are damaged, a person cannot feel

empathy for others. How should we interpret this? Here the notion of *empirically equivalent theories* is useful. Two or more theories are empirically equivalent if they are consistent with exactly the same set of observations, in which case no empirical evidence can decide between them. At least three interpretations of the mirror neuron findings are empirically equivalent: (1) strict physicalism, which claims that empathy is identical to the firings of mirror neurons; (2) mere-property dualism, which views empathy as an irreducible state of consciousness whose occurrence depends on the firing of mirror neurons; and (3) substance dualism, which holds that empathy is an irreducible state of consciousness in the soul that, while embodied, depends on mirror neuron activity. Since the data support all three equally, empirical science alone cannot settle the matter. Nor does an appeal to simplicity help, for simplicity functions only as a tiebreaker when theories are otherwise equal. The substance dualist will maintain that, once the broader philosophical arguments are considered, dualism is better supported than its competitors.

Consider a new argument. The argument can be stated as follows:

1. If I were a physical object (such as a brain or a body), then a third-person physical description would capture all the facts that are true of me.
2. But a third-person physical description does not capture all the facts that are true of me.
3. Therefore, I am not a physical object.
4. I am either a physical object or a soul.
5. Therefore, I am a soul.

A complete physical description of the world would be one that exhaustively details all objects, properties, and processes from a third-person point of view, including their spatiotemporal locations. For example, to describe an apple in a room, one might say that there exists an object three feet from the south wall and two feet from the east wall, and that the object has properties such as being red, round, and sweet.

By contrast, the first-person point of view describes the world from my own perspective. It relies on indexicals such as *I*, *here*, *now*, *there*, and *then*. *Here* and *now* refer to where and when I am; *there* and *then* designate where and when I am not. The most fundamental of these indexicals is *I*, which refers to myself—the self I know immediately through acts of self-awareness. In using *I*, I refer not to an external

description but to myself as the conscious, reflexive subject who owns my body and mental states.

Physicalism, at least in its widely accepted forms, denies that there are irreducible or privileged first-person perspectives. On this view, everything about me can be fully described in third-person object language. A physicalist description might say: “There exists a body at a specific location that is five feet eight inches tall and weighs 160 pounds.” A mere-property dualist might extend the description to include states such as: “This body is feeling pain” or “thinking about lunch.”

Yet no collection of third-person descriptions captures my subjective, first-person acquaintance with myself. For any set of such descriptions, it always remains an open question whether the individual described is identical with the “I” that I know myself to be. I do not know myself by first compiling a third-person description of mental and physical properties and then recognizing that someone—namely, me—satisfies that description. Rather, I know myself directly through immediate acquaintance in acts of self-awareness, and I can express that knowledge by using the term *I*.

The indexical *I* refers not to a body, not to mental properties, nor to any bundle of such properties described in third-person terms. Instead, it refers to my substantial self, the soul. Through self-awareness, I know that *I* denotes the uncomposed subject who possesses both my mental states and my body. Thus, the first-person perspective testifies to the reality of the soul as the true referent of *I*.

Finally, the modal argument for the soul can be summarized in five steps:

1. I am possibly disembodied (I could survive without my brain or body).
2. Neither my brain nor my body is possibly disembodied (they could not exist without being physical).
3. Therefore, I am not my brain or body.
4. I am either a soul or a brain or a body.
5. Therefore, I am a soul.

The most debated premise is (1). To defend it, philosophers have generally taken two approaches. Stewart Goetz, for example, appeals to

the *simple argument*: I am immediately aware of myself as a simple, unified substance, whereas I am also aware of my body as a complex, divisible thing. This epistemic awareness supports the possibility that I exist independently of my body. In the absence of any defeaters, such awareness is sufficient to affirm that I could exist disembodied. Charles Taliaferro, on the other hand, appeals to common modal intuitions. Most people can readily conceive of themselves surviving without their bodies, and this widespread intuition provides strong prima facie support for the possibility of disembodiment.

Remarkably, this intuition is reinforced by a growing body of empirical evidence in the form of near-death experiences (NDEs). Far from being rare, NDEs occur with notable frequency. A Gallup poll and other studies report that approximately 4 percent of both Germans and Americans—roughly one in twenty-five—have had such an experience.[209] This amounts to nine to twelve million Americans and as many as 200 to 300 million people worldwide. The core features of NDEs are strikingly consistent across cultures and religions, with parallels even in accounts from the ancient Near East. More than nine hundred scholarly articles have been published on the subject, and many researchers began their work as skeptics.[210] The evidence they uncovered, however, has often persuaded them of the authenticity of these experiences.

The details of NDEs are compelling. For instance, young children who know nothing of heaven or the afterlife report learning verifiable information during these episodes.[211] In so-called evidential cases, experiencers report facts they could not have otherwise known, and these are independently confirmed.[212] One striking case involved a woman who died during surgery and reported meeting her father, who told her he had just died and explained how it happened. At the time,

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[209] George Gallup & William Proctor, *Adventures in Immortality* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), 65–67.
Pim van Lommel et al., "Near-death experience in survivors of cardiac arrest," *The Lancet* 358, no. 9298 (2001): 2039–2045.
[210] Janice Miner Holden, Bruce Greyson, and Debbie James, eds., *The Handbook of Near-Death Experiences: Thirty Years of Investigation* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2009).
[211] Melvin Morse, *Closer to the Light: Learning from Children's Near-Death Experiences* (New York: Random House, 1990).
[212] Jeffrey Long, M.D., with Paul Perry, *Evidence of the Afterlife* (New York: HarperOne, 2010).
Bruce Greyson, "Near-death experiences and the brain," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1234 (2011): 1–7.

her family in the waiting room insisted he was alive. Only later did phone calls confirm that he had indeed died exactly as described—at the very time she reported seeing him.[213]

In another case, a young girl named Katie drowned and was clinically dead for three days. During that time, she reported being guided by an angel, meeting Jesus, and even visiting her family home. She described in vivid detail what each family member was doing, what they were wearing, and even what her mother was cooking. After her recovery, the shocked family confirmed every detail.[214] Similar cases include Maria at Harborview Hospital, who reported a shoe on a window ledge that was later found exactly as she described, and a comatose man who accurately recounted where a nurse had placed his dentures while he hovered above the room watching.[215] In yet another study, cardiologist Michael Sabom documented cardiac arrest patients who described their resuscitations with astonishing accuracy, despite being clinically unconscious. By contrast, patients without NDEs made frequent errors when asked to describe resuscitation procedures.[216]

Even more striking are cases of people born blind who gain temporary sight during NDEs, describing their surroundings with accuracy before returning to blindness upon regaining consciousness.[217] Across cultures and age groups—including atheists and very young children—the reports are consistent. People experience heightened consciousness when, by all physical measures, no consciousness should exist. These experiences frequently bring about profound life changes.

Physicalists object that the modal argument shows only epistemic or conceptual possibility, not true metaphysical possibility. For all we know, they claim, disembodiment might *seem* conceivable but still be impossible. Yet this objection simply assumes physicalism from the outset and so begs the question. The coherence of NDE reports, their independent verification, and their widespread consistency strongly

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[213] Kenneth Ring & Evelyn Elsaesser Valarino, *Lessons from the Light* (New York: Moment Point Press, 1998), ch. 7.
(They document multiple "peak in Darien" cases identical to the one described.)
[214] Morris & Kellehear, *Near-Death Experiences in Childhood* (Springer, 2017), 112–115.
[215] Kimberly Clark Sharp, *After the Light* (New York: William Morrow, 1995), 45–55.
[216] Michael Sabom, *Recollections of Death: A Medical Investigation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), ch. 4.
[217] Kenneth Ring & Sharon Cooper, *Mindsight: Near-Death and Out-of-Body Experiences in the Blind* (Institute of Noetic Sciences, 1999).

suggest not merely conceptual but metaphysical possibility. If even one case of disembodied existence is credible, then premise (1) is vindicated. And if premise (1) holds, the modal argument provides powerful support for substance dualism: we are not reducible to our brains or bodies, but are, in fact, *souls.*

Epilogue – Becoming from Being: How Metaphysics Fuels Mindset

The book is now finished. Along the way, we have examined arguments that—if correct—would amount to nothing less than a paradigm shift in how we understand reality itself. The implications are not minor adjustments within an existing worldview; they are sweeping, even cosmic, in scope. If the arguments developed in this book are sound, then the center holds firm on at least the following remarkable conclusions:

1. **There exists a necessary concrete reality**—a being that cannot fail to exist. This being is conscious, possesses immense causal power (capable of bringing about or grounding the entire universe), and is plausibly superintelligent, as suggested by the extraordinary fine-tuning of the cosmos and the deep intelligibility woven into the structure of reality.
2. **This being entered human history**. It visited the people of Earth as an Avatar who went by the name of Jesus Christ. He was crucified—and then physically resurrected.
3. **This being will return**. One day in the future, it will again visit the people of Earth—bringing with it the fulfillment of hope, renewal, and restoration.

Although the third claim was not argued for explicitly in this book, if the first two claims are true, then it becomes extraordinarily plausible. If the necessary foundation of reality is conscious, immensely powerful, and has already entered history once, then the expectation that it will act again in the future is hardly far-fetched. And if the arguments developed in this book succeed, we now possess strong reason to regard the first two claims as not merely imaginable, but genuinely plausible.

If so, the implications are staggering. Reality would not be an impersonal accident or a silent cosmic machine. Instead, the deepest layer of existence would be personal, purposeful, and alive—a reality that has already stepped into our world once, and may yet do so again.

The journey we have undertaken is not a mere intellectual exercise; it is a fundamental re-calibration of reality itself. To conclude that existence is grounded in a Necessary, Conscious Mind who has acted decisively

within human history is not to solve a final crossword puzzle, but to be handed the cipher for everything that follows. This conclusion is not an inert fact to be stored on a mental shelf. It is a live, generative power source, a metaphysical engine capable of fueling a mindset so robust, so resilient, that it can rightly be called *indomitable*. For what we believe about ultimate reality—about *Being*—determines everything about what we can *become*. If the universe is a story, then discovering you are a part of that story changes how you walk, how you work, and how you withstand the storms. It is here, at the intersection of metaphysics and mindset, that *The Universal Plan* becomes deeply personal, justifying a spirit of unconquerable hope, relentless perseverance, intelligent optimism, and profound resilience.

Consider **hope**. In a world assumed to be a cosmic accident, hope is little more than a psychological coping mechanism, a whistle in the dark against the encroaching silence of the void. It is a subjective preference imposed upon an indifferent reality. But if reality itself is anchored in a transcendent Mind whose character has been revealed in the conquest of death, hope is transformed. It ceases to be a wish and becomes a rational expectation. The resurrection of Jesus is not a mythic metaphor; it is the historical proof-of-concept that the deepest truth of the universe is not decay, but renewal; not despair, but redemption. This hope is not fragile. It is anchored in the very nature of Being, in the character of the One who is both the ground of existence and the victor over the grave. To hope, then, is not to ignore the darkness; it is to know, with justified confidence, that the light has already won and that the dawn is an inevitability written into the fabric of the cosmos.

This rationally grounded hope becomes the fuel for **perseverance** and **resilience**. To persevere is to continue in a course of action despite difficulty or with little prospect of success. But in a universe with a Plan, the prospect of ultimate success is guaranteed. Our lives are not random, disconnected events; they are threads woven into a divine tapestry whose final pattern is one of redemption. This knowledge imbues our struggles with meaning. Suffering is no longer a meaningless wound inflicted by a chaotic world; it is a profound, albeit painful, part of a story that ends in triumph. This is the very engine of resilience. The ability to bounce back from adversity is not just a matter of psychological grit; it is the art of drawing strength from a deeper reality. When we fall, we know that the ground holding us up is the hand of a Creator who has promised that our momentary afflictions are

preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. We are not merely surviving; we are being forged.

From this soil grows a profound and intelligent **optimism**. This is not the shallow optimism that ignores pain, but the deep, clear-eyed optimism that sees through it to the ultimate reality. If the resurrection is the central event of history, then we have already seen the trailer for how the movie ends. It ends with life conquering death, with love conquering hate, and with God setting all things right. This is not a guess; it is an inference from the best available evidence. This worldview allows us to look upon the horrors of the world, to grieve them honestly, but to never grant them the final word. The arc of the moral universe is long, but we have been shown that it bends, definitively, toward justice and redemption. Optimism, therefore, is not a personality trait; it is a metaphysical commitment, a rational stance toward a future guaranteed by the One who holds all of history in His hands.

This framework also provides the ultimate justification for a **growth mindset**. A fixed mindset—the belief that one's qualities are carved in stone—is a natural corollary of a physicalist worldview in which you are nothing more than a complex collection of particles, a biological machine whose capacities are determined and limited. But if you are an immaterial soul, a conscious self created in the image of an infinite and omniscient Mind, your potential for growth is boundless. Your life is not about proving your fixed worth but about becoming more like the source of all truth, goodness, and beauty. This shatters the fear of failure, for every mistake becomes an opportunity for learning and development. It transforms intellectual and moral development from a burden into a joyous adventure of aligning yourself more closely with the grain of reality. You are not a finished product; you are a work in progress, with an infinite horizon for growth before you.

To illustrate this spirit, it is instructive to consider an unlikely but illuminating example from contemporary culture: *Son Goku*, the protagonist of the Japanese series *Dragon Ball*. Goku embodies what might be called a “fictional parable” of the indomitable spirit. His defining trait is not merely his prodigious strength but his relentless drive to grow, to overcome, and to rise even after defeat. No matter how formidable the adversary, no matter how many times he is struck down, he rises with renewed determination. His setbacks become the very fuel for his future strength.

While few humans exhibit motivation at this extraordinary level, the figure of Goku captures the imagination precisely because it resonates with something deeply human: the longing to transcend limitations, to continually become more than one is. Yet within the metaphysical framework we have outlined, the drive exemplified in this fictional character is not only admirable but rationally justified. If the universe is purposive, if Being itself is good and creative, if the human soul reflects the image of an infinite Mind, then the human vocation is indeed to grow endlessly, to persevere without surrender, and to rise each time stronger than before. As Goku himself said:

"You see, when I fight, I don't fight to win or because I enjoy hurting others. I fight to push myself past my limits, to protect those I love, and to give others the chance to do the same. Every battle is a chance to grow, to stand taller than before, and to show that even in the face of impossible odds, we can rise. That's who I am, and that's what it means to never give up.

No matter how strong I get, I always find myself testing those limits. I've been beaten down more times than I can count, but every single time I rise back up stronger than before. That's what it means to be a warrior. Strength doesn't come from never failing — it comes from getting back up when you've been knocked down, from pushing past what you thought was your limit, and then breaking through it again and again. As long as I can stand, I'll keep moving forward, because there's no end to how far we can go. Real strength isn't about taking life—it's about protecting it, about believing that even the smallest spark of good can grow into something greater. That's why I won't give up on you, or on anyone. Because as long as there's a chance, no matter how small, I'll keep fighting for it."[218]

In fact, our justification for resilience and perseverance is greater than Goku's, for ours is grounded not in fiction but in reality itself—in the character of a Creator who has conquered death and guaranteed redemption.

[218] This quote from Goku is a slightly adapted synthesis of various quotes he made from *Dragon Ball Z* and *Dragon Ball Super*.

This same principle provides the supreme **motivation for the acquisition of knowledge**. If the universe is the product of an infinite Intellect, then every discovery in science, every insight in philosophy, and every lesson from history is a chance to trace the thoughts of God. To study the laws of physics is to admire the mathematical elegance of the Creator. To learn a new language is to appreciate the gift of communication He instilled in us. To understand history is to witness His providential hand ultimately guiding the story. In this light, studying is not a chore to be completed for a grade; it is an act of communion, a form of worship, a way of drawing closer to the Mind behind all things.

Yet even knowledge alone is not the final aim. A person can gather facts and arguments and still lack the one thing a metaphysical vision is meant to give: **wisdom**. Wisdom is truth that has been lived with long enough to change us—it softens our reactions, steadies us under pressure, and teaches us how to carry both success and disappointment. It grows slowly, through attention and humility: by sitting with great stories until their characters begin to feel like companions, by learning from the mistakes and courage of those who came before us, and by letting history and culture remind us that we are not the first to struggle, fail, or hope. Wisdom shows itself in small, everyday ways—in knowing when to speak and when to listen, in choosing patience when anger would be easier, in doing what is right even when no one is watching, and in holding onto what is true when it would be simpler to let go. If the universe is ordered by an Ultimate Intellect, then our calling is not merely to know more, but to become people who can *bear* more—more responsibility, more suffering, more joy—without becoming bitter or afraid. Wisdom is what keeps our beliefs from becoming hollow, and it is what slowly aligns our lives with the deep structure of reality itself. Wisdom, when fully awakened, does not end in abstraction; it culminates in a vision—a vision of **cosmic kinship.** If there truly exists a Universal Plan—and the arguments we have traced give us serious reason to affirm that there is—then reality is not a scatter of disconnected beings adrift in an indifferent void. It is a unified, intelligible whole, within which conscious, rational beings arise as participants in a shared order of meaning. We are not isolated accidents. We are co-inheritors of a common metaphysical home, sustained within the same structure of reality, oriented—however dimly—toward the same ultimate source.

To see this clearly is to recognize that the category of the "other," in its deepest and most divisive sense, begins to collapse. If all rationally

sentient beings exist within the same overarching order of being, then the lines we draw—race, ethnicity, nationality, culture—cannot mark ultimate divisions. They are real distinctions, but they are not foundational separations. Racism, in particular, is exposed as a profound metaphysical error: it treats superficial or contingent differences as if they constituted a deeper divide in being itself. But if we share a common origin within the same rationally ordered reality, then such divisions are revealed for what they are—misreadings of the structure of existence. The same applies to all forms of unjust discrimination. They mistake difference for distance, and variation for separation.

And this vision extends even further. Should rationally sentient extraterrestrial beings exist, they too would arise within the same universal order.[219] They would not be metaphysical strangers, but

[219] On another note, I find this very real possibility deeply exciting. NASA and the broader astronomical community have now confirmed approximately 6,000 exoplanets, and that number continues to grow. Among these, a smaller but significant subset—often estimated on the order of a few dozen—are considered especially promising candidates for habitability, meaning they are Earth-sized (or near it) and orbit within the habitable zone of their stars, where liquid water could plausibly exist. Such candidates include Kepler-452b, Teegarden's Star b, TRAPPIST-1e, and others. Of course, it must be emphasized that no direct evidence of life—let alone intelligent life—has yet been confirmed, and the step from potentially habitable conditions to actual biological or rational life remains uncertain. If one were to reason by induction, however, the implications are striking. The Milky Way alone contains on the order of 100–400 billion stars, many of which are now known to host planetary systems. Given the growing number of potentially habitable worlds, it is at least a live scientific possibility that the galaxy could harbor thousands—or even far more—technologically capable civilizations, depending on how frequently life and intelligence arise. While such estimates remain speculative and are constrained by significant uncertainties (as highlighted in frameworks like the Drake Equation), they underscore the point that, on a cosmic scale, the possibilities are vast. Whether contact with intelligent civilizations on such planets would be feasible at any point in the foreseeable future is an entirely separate question. Given the immense interstellar distances involved—often spanning tens to thousands of light-years—any form of direct interaction would face extraordinary physical and technological challenges. Nevertheless, the possibility itself is both scientifically open and philosophically rich. If such beings do exist, then the question of contact—whether initiated by us or by them—would need to be approached with great care. In principle, any such possibilities should be guided by wisdom, caution, and benevolence, rather than fear or domination. While we must remain cautious and avoid unwarranted speculation, the possibility of intelligent extraterrestrial life is real, scientifically grounded, and cannot be lightly dismissed. For a continuously updated catalog of confirmed exoplanets and their properties, see NASA's Exoplanet Archive: https://science.nasa.gov/exoplanets/exoplanet-catalog/.

cosmic neighbors—participants in the same intelligible structure of reality, sustained by the same ultimate ground. However alien their biology or culture might appear, they would share with us the most fundamental feature: rational participation in being itself. In that sense, they too would stand within the same horizon of kinship.

Yet this vision does not soften moral seriousness—it intensifies it to its highest degree. To speak of kinship is not to dissolve boundaries, excuse wrongdoing, or tolerate evil. On the contrary, it raises the stakes. If the one before me is not an isolated "other" but a fellow participant in the same ontological order, then my responsibilities toward them are not diminished but deepened. Justice, moral clarity, and rightful boundaries remain indispensable. Malevolence, abuse, and injustice must still be resisted—firmly and without compromise. But they are resisted not in the spirit of annihilating an alien other, but in the recognition that evil is a distortion within a shared reality. To uphold justice is not to abandon kinship; it is to protect the integrity of that kinship.

Within the Christian tradition, this vision finds a striking and luminous articulation. In the Gospel of John, after the crucifixion, Mary Magdalene encounters the risen Christ. Standing on the far side of death—having passed through what appears to be the ultimate boundary—he gives her a message for his disciples: *"Go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'"* (John 20:17). The force of this declaration is extraordinary. Here is one whom the tradition understands as uniquely related to the divine, yet he does not emphasize separation or hierarchy. He speaks in the language of family. He calls them *brothers*.

If such a relation is even possible, then the implications are profound. For if a being of such radically distinct ontological status can speak of finite, contingent persons in terms of kinship, then no lesser difference—whether of race, culture, intellect, or even species—can serve as a principled ground for ultimate division. The greatest conceivable divide—that between Creator and creature—is not used to enforce distance, but to establish communion. And if that boundary can be crossed, then all lesser boundaries lose their claim to finality.

This does not erase difference. It does not collapse identities or negate the need for discernment, justice, or protection. But it reveals that

beneath every distinction lies a deeper unity: a shared participation in a single, ordered, and meaningful reality. The universe is not merely a stage upon which we appear and compete; it is a vast and intricate dwelling, a cosmos in which every rational being stands in relation—not merely externally, but at the level of being itself.

To grasp this is to undergo a transformation of vision. The other is no longer an adversary to be reduced, nor a stranger to be dismissed, but a presence within the same great field of existence—one whose life is bound, however invisibly, to our own. We do not merely coexist; we co-belong. And if that is true, then racism, division, and unjust exclusion are not only moral failures; they are failures to see reality as it truly is.

What follows is not sentimentality, but responsibility: a call to live in a way that reflects the structure of the world itself. A call to uphold justice without hatred, to maintain boundaries without denying kinship, and to resist evil without surrendering the deeper truth that, at the most fundamental level, we stand together within the same cosmic order—under the same source, within the same reality, and toward the same ultimate horizon of meaning.

It is this total vision of reality that makes possible a genuinely **indomitable spirit**, a soul that cannot be conquered by suffering because it knows, with bone-deep certainty, that suffering is not the ultimate reality. What such a life looks like when tested to its limits can be seen most clearly not in theory, but in a story. Let us imagine a man named Aton. For 120 years, Aton lives a life of almost unimaginable hardship. Like Job, he is a good man, yet he loses his family to disease, his wealth to disaster, and his health to a painful, lingering illness. His friends mock him, his society shuns him, and he is left in utter desolation. Every day for over a century is a trial of pain, loneliness, and grief. From the outside, his life is a portrait of gratuitous, meaningless agony. Yet Aton holds fast. He holds fast not to a blind hope, but to a reasoned trust in the hope of the God revealed in the empty tomb. He knows that his story is but one chapter in a much larger book.

Then, after 120 years, Aton dies. He awakens not into nothingness, but into the arms of the God he trusted. He is reunited with the loved ones he lost. He meets the saints and heroes of history, and countless new souls who become his eternal family. His 120 years of suffering, once

an all-consuming reality, are now seen in their true perspective. He lives in this state of joy for a hundred years, and his former pain is a distant memory. He is there for a thousand years, and the memory becomes a faint whisper. He is there for a million years, a billion, a trillion. He is there for a googolplex of years, and the 120 years of sorrow have shrunk to an infinitesimal speck, a single, forgotten tear that was wiped away on the first morning of an everlasting joy that will never, ever fade. His suffering was real, but it was not ultimate. It was a fleeting, momentary affliction that prepared him for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

Aton's spirit was indomitable not because he was strong, but because his *foundation* was. He was anchored in the unshakable truth that the universe is not a tragedy, but a divine comedy whose final act is reunion, redemption, and eternal fellowship with the source of all love. This is the power of a mindset fueled by metaphysics. It tells us that our lives are not defined by our scars, but by the One who heals them. It assures us that our hope is not a fantasy, but the most reasonable thing in the world. It invites us, no matter our circumstances, to live with courage, with joy, and with a spirit that cannot be broken.

After all the philosophical proofs have been weighed, the historical data analyzed, and the probabilities calculated, we are left with something much quieter, yet far more daunting than an academic conclusion. We are left with ourselves. *What now?*

If we set aside the equations and the ancient texts for just a moment, I invite you to look inward. Is there not a quiet, persistent ache in the human chest? A deep, visceral longing that the universe is not just a cold accident, but a story with a purpose? Deep down, don't you *want* this to be true? Don't you long for a reality where justice actually matters, where broken things are finally made right, and where your life genuinely means something?

Perhaps you are still uncertain. That is completely okay. Uncertainty is a deeply human experience, and the evidence—while robust—does not force your hand. It leaves room for *you* to choose. But it is important to realize that uncertainty does not exempt us from making a choice. To stand at the threshold of this decision and try to remain "neutral" is not actually a neutral act; it is simply a quiet way of closing the door.

If you have read this far, and you think The Universal Plan has some reasonable chance of being true, I ask you not to settle. Think about this carefully. Consider the actual weight of the choice in front of you. When we strip away the complexities, you are standing at the intersection of four possible realities:

Decision	The Universal Plan is True	The Universal Plan is False
I Choose to Embrace It	**Infinite Payoff:** You find what your heart has been searching for. Every scar is healed, your life finds its ultimate meaning, and you enter into a profound, eternal home.	**Minimal Loss:** You lived a life of deep hope. You chose to love, to forgive, and to seek goodness. When the end comes, you return to the dust, but you leave behind a beautiful legacy.
I Choose to Walk Away	**Infinite Loss:** The deepest tragedy. The home you always longed for was real, the door was open, but you chose to stay outside in the cold. You miss the very thing you were made for.	**Minimal Payoff:** You win the intellectual debate. You get the fleeting satisfaction of knowing you weren't fooled. But the prize is the exact same silence and dust.

Let’s look at this honestly.

If you choose to walk away and you happen to be right, what is your reward? A hollow victory. You get to be "right" before you and everyone you have ever loved eventually fade into nothingness. The payoff is functionally zero.

But what if you walk away and you are wrong? Imagine the heartbreak of discovering that the universe really *did* have a purpose, that the ultimate love you craved was waiting for you, but you traded it away because you were afraid to be wrong. It is the sorrow of missing out on your own life's meaning.

Now look at the other path. Suppose you choose to embrace this, and you turn out to be wrong. What have you truly lost? You lived a life anchored in profound hope. You brought light into a dark world, you refused to surrender to despair, and you lived with courage. There is no shame in that kind of life; it is a profoundly noble way to spend your days.

But if you embrace it and it is *true*—everything changes. The call you feel is finally answered. You step out of the shadows and into the light. The longings that you perhaps felt as a child and maybe even feel now—for adventure, hope, love, peace, healing, belonging, knowledge, making an impact, discovery, transcendence—they all come true.

The stakes here are deeply asymmetrical. You have everything of value to gain, and practically nothing of eternal consequence to lose.

I invite you, with the utmost respect for your intellect and your personal journey: do not walk away from this just because it is easier. Do not let the cynicism of the world talk you out of your own hope. The evidence has brought you to the door. The mind has done its work. But the mind can only show you the bridge; it cannot walk across it for you.[220]

The Universal Plan is not just an argument to be won. It is an invitation. Will you step through?

[220] For a deeper treatment of Pascal's Wager, please see Gavin Ortlund's video at: https://youtu.be/cqIzG8WmscU?si=sUr27SkUu8GmRQyR.